

THE SERVANT OF DARKNESS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This work of creative fiction with a critical introduction has been written as a defense and culmination of my studies of Medieval Literature and creative writing at Texas A&M University. The critical introduction analyzes the history and purpose of fanfiction, the inspiration for my writing, and attempts to dialogue with the works and thoughts of J. R. R. Tolkien within the world he created in the genre of fantasy fiction. The story focuses on a villainous protagonist in Tolkien's Middle Earth with the intent of demonstrating theological points such as the purpose of evil, reprobation, and predestination.

DEDICATION

To the Memory of Tamara Berry, 1955-2014

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INTRODUCTION

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but the also the Gentiles?

-St. Paul, *Romans 9:21-24 (English Standard Version)*

The Servant of Darkness is a work of fantasy fiction which encompasses both my studies of Medieval Literature, and my experience and interaction with creative writing. Likewise, this work marks a pause in my academic journey, and concludes my studies at Texas A&M University. In this introduction, I intend to communicate the place and purpose of fanfiction in literature, my own literary influences, and why I chose a creative work rather than the traditional approach.

The Servant of Darkness is not the first story I have written. The intent of my other works was none other than to keep my readers turning the page. By contrast, this thesis is the first story I have written with dual intent: not only to create an engaging story, but to make a strong apology for a position which has been debated for centuries. This story can be thought of as an analogy of sorts. Using Tolkien's Middle Earth, the work's purpose is to address certain aspects which the author incorporated into the framework of the story by use of demonstration. It is not an attempt to revamp what he created, but to introduce characters which adhere to the author's vision of Middle Earth.

In this way, the protagonist whom I have created is a medium by which I dialogue with Tolkien and his theological ideals. This analogous story which seeks to demonstrate in-depth concepts is certainly not perfect. Since the work is set in Tolkien's world, I abide by the rules, boundaries, and limitations which the author has set. This is partially the reason why the analogy is imperfect, the other reason being that there appears to be no such thing as perfect analogies. Despite these limitations, I wrote *The Servant of Darkness* in hope that it will aid my readers in grasping the theology of predestination in such a way that it is easy to comprehend, and enlightening.

Of Fanfiction and Orcs, and Why a Creative Work

Perhaps one of the most controversial forms of writing is fanfiction. With the advent of the internet, this form of writing has become more prevalent. Popular franchises have spawned a number of books, films, games, and adaptations created by admirers. The thing which makes this writing so controversial is a question of ethics. Intellectual property, especially in Western culture, is a well-held principle. For an aspiring author to undertake a work of fanfiction is a task which carries much risk. According to Henry Jenkins, "These questions of ethics also impact fans at the intersection of academia and fandom, as fans must choose whether to make their creative work visible and available, risking not only academic exposure, but also legal question," (343). Many authors consider such works to be plagiarism, which is a serious offense for writers. With such risks, why write fanfiction at all? Why take such a risk to reputation and authorial credibility? My answer is threefold in nature.

The author of a piece of fanfiction first must come to terms with the intent of the work. The default intent of those who engage in fanfiction is generally not malicious. As the name implies, the “fan” in fanfiction refers to the author who is also an admirer of the work which he or she is engaging. The purpose is not to overturn or devalue the original work’s framework, but to pay tribute to the author admired. As an unspoken rule of aspiring fanfiction writers, the purpose of the new work is usually to build upon the author’s original work by introducing new conceptions of the genre and characters that fit within the framework of existing materials rather than ignore, or reject, them (Jenkins 160). When thinking of fanfiction as a tribute, this notion is directly related to its purpose. As an author writes an original work, there are almost always some details which spark the interest of the reader other than the obvious materials, something like an obscure character or an event which gets only a brief mention in the story. This curiosity with seemingly less than significant details is what then drives fanfiction writers to compose a work which satisfies the curiosity of fans, yet is completely compatible with the world which the author has constructed.

Due to the tributary nature of fanfiction and the satisfactory appeal it contains, there is another aspect of fanfiction which seeks a more challenging purpose. This other purpose is to interact with the ideals of the authors themselves, which is what I strive to do with *The Servant of Darkness*. Authors often place their strongest sentiments into their works, and Tolkien is certainly no different in this respect. Tolkien’s colleague C.S. Lewis wrote a curious work entitled *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. The title and the work itself are very similar to an older work, and this is certainly of no coincidence. John Bunyan’s

The Pilgrim's Progress was Lewis' primary influence for this story. In a letter to his publisher, Lewis described the novel as "a kind of Bunyan up to date" (McGrath 169). Did Lewis view his work as plagiarism since it was obviously heavily borrowed from Bunyan? No, he did not. Bunyan was obviously an influence on Lewis in both his life, and his writing. By creating a work which heavily mirrored Bunyan's, he was not attempting to rewrite the story better, but to create a "what if" experiment with Bunyan's tale as a starting point. Lewis' curiosity was to speculate how certain elements not addressed in the original story would unfold. Bunyan died hundreds of years before Lewis' time, and *The Pilgrim's Regress* was a way to have a theoretical dialogue with Bunyan by interacting with the framework of his story. In my own fanfiction which I have presented as my thesis, this was my exact intent when interacting with the works of Tolkien. By creating characters who adhere to the boundaries he determined in his works, I aim to explore certain concepts and demonstrate how they would work in Middle Earth.

Although the majority of characters I have created are original, there is something to be said about casting an orc as the protagonist. One of the aforementioned risks in fanfiction is copyright infringement. The fanfiction writer treads a fine line between tribute and plagiarism, so naturally, orcs are questionable. Even though the word "orc" appears first in Tolkien's works, the type of creatures they are is not original. In *The Hobbit*, orcs are called by a more commonly recognized term, "goblins" (Tolkien 5). This means that their origins transcend Tolkien, and reach into centuries of human folklore. The aforementioned term, "orc", is also not without its origin in the distant

past. Tolkien seems to have borrowed the word “orc” from the Anglo-Saxon term for evil spirits, “orcneas”, which appears in the text of *Beowulf* (112). In recent years, orcs have become common characters in the fantasy genre, and they also appear in numerous role-playing games. For the purposes of the thesis, I relinquished the orcs in my story from my own creativity. I tried with all diligence to make them Tolkien’s orcs rather than my own. This is not to say that there are not speculative assumptions about them at all, but that any speculation is kept strictly within the bounds of Tolkien’s world. This principle, of course, is what fuels the entire conception of *The Servant of Darkness*. The orcs I present in this endeavor are not to be thought of as an entirely new take on orcs, but continuing in a tradition regarding the creatures by addressing them at their first appearance in the fantasy genre. By writing a creative work, rather than a traditional thesis, this mode of addressing Tolkien allows me to interact with the text in a way that other modes would not permit. Specifically, fanfiction brings the dialogue to Tolkien’s own playing field, meaning that I must interact with his premises and make my case using what he has set forth in Middle Earth.

Thesis Influences: Medieval Literature, Fantasy, Theology, and the Grotesque

My introduction to Medieval Literature began early. By the time I was ten years old, I had read *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Howard Pyle’s rendition of *King Arthur*. By the time I was twelve, I began to read Tolkien’s works, which were my introduction to fantasy literature. One inescapable fact about Medieval Literature is that the theology of the period is prevalent throughout the pages of numerous works, even in

the more fantastical of stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Aside from Tolkien's works, theological works have also played an important role in shaping this thesis. Like the majority of medieval authors, *The Lord of the Rings* is prolific in theological tropes, imagery, and plots. Tolkien described his stories as "fundamentally religious and Catholic" (Kravik 10). That is not to say that the work is allegory, an allegation which Tolkien denied, but that the infrastructure of the work itself has a basis in Catholicism (*The Fellowship of the Ring* x). As both a medievalist scholar and a writer of creative fiction, I find myself enamored with Tolkien as a professional and a person. Perhaps the most striking difference between Tolkien and me is the fact I am Protestant. Since we differ in some respects when it comes to religion, the theological works I cite would probably be far different from those Tolkien would have cited. Nevertheless, there is an author we would mutually agree upon who is perhaps one of the greatest thinkers and authors in Christian history, Augustine of Hippo. The most obvious Augustinian influence in Tolkien's work is in his development of the orcs themselves. According to Tolkien, they are the creation of Morgoth, the dark lord who preceded Sauron, who took elves and created a corrupted inversion of what they once were (*The Silmarillion* 193). The origin of orcs is part of an important principle which shapes the creation of Middle Earth's background history. Orcs are vile, wicked creatures, but the fact that they are formed from something which was inherently good is telling. This idea of evil not being an independent force, but a corruption of what is good, directly stems from the theories of Augustine. Augustine promoted the belief that evil is parasitic; its very existence dependent upon the existence of good, which means

that good can exist without evil, but evil cannot exist without good to corrupt (15-16). Tolkien shared this belief which is evident not only in orcs, but also in all evil within Middle Earth.

Knowing Tolkien's Catholicism, and his admission that his work is Catholic in nature, the way in which *The Lord of the Rings* is crafted showcases the beliefs which he espoused. When writing the thesis, I had to ask myself how a Protestant would respond to a very Catholic author who wrote a very Catholic work. Though there were a number of subjects that I could have chosen, the one which caught my attention was Tolkien's treatment of predestination, and consequently, reprobation and the purpose of evil. One of the greatest differences between Catholics and Protestants is the view of predestination. The doctrine of predestination was addressed in Canon 17 of the Council of Trent during the Counter Reformation, proclaiming those who hold to such beliefs to be "anathema" (44). Protestants, historically, have assumed the bondage of human will, and the depravity of the human condition due to Original Sin. Because of these preconditions, humans are totally rebellious and helpless, which necessitates predestination. While Catholics share the belief in Original Sin with Protestants, the extent to which it has damaged the human condition is lesser. The free-will of humanity is given a more libertarian approach wherein human choice actively plays a part in salvation. Tolkien, in this manner, assumes the free-will of his characters, all except for orcs. Unlike other sentient creatures such as hobbits and humans, orcs bear no indication they have free-will of any kind, but that they are completely devoid of it; creatures who are born, bred, and predetermined to be evil (Chism 556). Why make this rather

contradictory distinction between races? It seems that assigning orcs to a predetermined fate was done as a way of scrutinizing and critically analyzing the concept in comparison to his more likeable characters who are endowed with free-will (Chism 556). For one who comes from a sect of Protestantism which emphasizes the importance of predestination, the place of orcs in Middle Earth, and the constraints placed upon them, raises many interesting questions, and allows for speculation. The fact that Tolkien's orcs are predestined to be evil bares implication on the nature of evil itself. Tolkien's works appear to portray evil as a purposeless, chaotic force created by those who seek to destroy Eru's creation and thwart his plans; but unlike him, Augustine argued that evil has a certain purpose to fulfill. Augustine contends that evil enhances the joy of good, and that God in his omnipotence is intent on bringing forth good out of even the most terrible of evils (11). If his assertion be true, then predestination must serve some purpose in bringing good out of evil. In order that predestination may be true, providential determinism is a necessity. This is the contrast which separates Tolkien's theological thought from my own. Whereas he assumes free-will, I assume predestination. However, given that Tolkien allows for predestination to exist within his fictional world, it is this area which I seek to address within the bounds of Middle Earth.

Aside from predestination being the central theme of the thesis, there is also a secondary theme of grotesqueness which I incorporate. The idea of creating a protagonist who is an orc was simplistic. To counteract this simplicity, I choose to create a character that is orc, and is not. To say the least, Tolkien's orcs are ugly. Grotesqueness can be said to be ugly, but the two are not synonymous. The grotesque is

something which is both appealing and appalling to human senses, and in such a manner, the protagonist being a half-orc is something which captures the horrifying nature of something that shares human traits, but is obviously too terrifying and “other” to be human (Komornick 89 and 93). This is why I chose to endow my character with both human and orcish traits, a hybrid of the two races known as a half-orc. The first mention of the creatures appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Frodo notices that a pipe weed vendor looks to be “half like a goblin” (Tolkien 204). These hybrids have mysterious origins, some believing them to be products of mixed bloodlines by the use of sorcery (Day 203). In order to capture this character’s otherness, his appearance needed to match. Much like the grotesque art of Charles Le Brun, who is able to endow recognizable humanity balanced with animals which matched the creatures’ characteristics, this was the goal in the creation of the protagonist (Montagu 19-20). His physical characteristics not only need mark him as other, but also to be consistent with his personality. The description of the face of the protagonist is done with the expectancy that when the reader envisions his grotesque visage, it will evoke feelings of fear, estrangement, and even pity. Much like Leonardo da Vinci’s own grotesques, Le Brun’s monsters are created with an open interpretation in mind, allowing those who view his art to feel humor or uneasiness, and yes, pity for their crude appearances (Gombrich 74). This careful consideration for appearance creates the need for readers to pity and empathize with the protagonist despite the evils he commits. Giambattista della Porta’s technique in portraying human-animal hybrids was also considered in the creation of the protagonist, especially in representing the face. Like those of Le Brun,

della Porta's grotesques are similar in that the human figures exhibit identifiable animal and human traits, so much so that it is difficult to determine where the animal ends and the human begins, as displayed in figure 1. The human modeled after a boar, accentuating an open mouth, was of particular interest. The boar-like openness of the mouth is what I envisioned for my protagonist, his canines protruding from the lower jaw much like the aforementioned animal (see a). In conjunction with the boar-like features of an open mouth, the sharp contrast of a calm front, as displayed in the dog-like character (see b), added an element of intelligence and cunning which made the protagonist appear more dangerous, and superior to the orcs with which he lives.

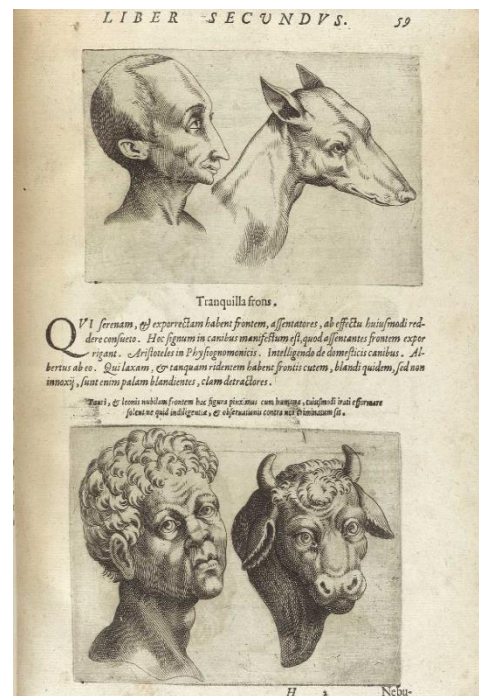


Figure 1. a) The boar figure accentuating an “exterum os” (open mouth) (della Porta 53).

b) The dog figure exhibiting a “tranquilla fronz” (calm front) (della Porta 59).

My half-orc is something of a conglomerate, the product of orcs and humans, but possessing features reminiscent of the animals that embody his character; a character that is both sympathetic and deplorable in nature. For the purposes of the story, the character's obscure origin is meant to assert an element of mystery. The protagonist's lineage is of those granted free-will, and also those who are predestined, which serves the purpose of enhancing the plot.

The Thesis as a Critical Response: Tolkien's Catholicism, my Protestantism

As stated prior, whereas Tolkien assumes free-will, I assume predestination. Since this thesis is a work of fanfiction, I am bound to adhere to the boundaries and limitations of the Tolkien's Middle Earth. If Tolkien had not allowed for predestination to exist within the story's framework, a Protestant like me would have little to say in regards to the matter; but since he has allowed for it to exist in the story in a very limited fashion, this then leaves room for exploration.

Tolkien's theological viewpoints on Original Sin and free-will shape his stories in such a way that reflect his Catholicism. It almost seems contradictory to grant any race within his stories, even ones who are as detestable as orcs, a predetermined fate. It is reasonable to assume, given his position, that his view of predestination is one that is negative in nature. How could predestining finite creatures to such a fate be good? This is where my Protestantism comes in. Tolkien's treatment of predestination is one that seems to condemn the idea altogether with little pondering as to if it could have some divine good behind it. What use would there be in decreeing the reprobation of

someone? It is these questions I attempt to answer. Augustine was very influential on Tolkien, but unlike him, he viewed evil as having a divine purpose, and predestination is the mechanism that makes it so. Augustine, who himself was Catholic, goes so far as to contend that even the evil committed by men in defiance to God's will ultimately works for his good and just purposes (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Pelikan 294). What is yet more astounding is that Augustine firmly believed in what some have dubbed double predestination, the idea that God predetermines who will kindly inherit eternal life and who will justly inherit damnation, but this term is a misnomer because predestination by default has a twofold effect (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Pelikan 276 and 297). Augustine is not the only Catholic who held to predestination; the 9th Century German monk, Gottschalk of Orbais, also defended this view. Before the advent of the Protestant Reformation when theologians such as John Calvin stressed the importance of the doctrine, Gottschalk had already begun to promote it nearly seven-hundred years prior. Gottschalk emphasized the importance of the doctrine in asserting that predestination works to both save those God has chosen for eternal life, and conversely, to condemn those he has chosen for eternal destruction; the latter of the two effects working in benefit of those whom God has chosen to save (Gottschalk 55). It is often the misconception that reprobates are those which have no control over the evil they commit, but are compelled to do so by outside forces. On the contrary, Gottschalk argues that a person who is a slave to evil, by nature and choice, has the freedom to only do what is evil (60). What Gottschalk is asserting is the effect of Original Sin. Because humans are evil by nature, they only choose to utilize

their freedom to do what is evil, meaning that apart from grace, none can do what is pleasing to God (*The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, Pelikan 82). Gottschalk did not believe he was teaching what was contrary to the Catholic faith, and found himself in agreement with the conclusions of Augustine (*The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, Pelikan 83 and 85). In my story, the protagonist is one of these who are predetermined to be damned.

Following in the footsteps of Augustine and Gottschalk, Martin Luther and John Calvin, the figureheads of the Reformation, would not only confirm their ideas, but expound upon them. Drawing upon Augustine and Gottschalk, Luther argues that God works evil in the damned, and by them, in the goodness of his omnipotence in which he employs the wicked as instruments of his own glory to the benefit of those he has chosen for salvation (156). As in the case of Luther's contention, the notion of God not being thwarted by evil, but employing evil in his providence, tempts one to think that the creator himself is evil; but like Luther, Calvin averts such thoughts indicating, "...Satan reigns in the reprobate...God works in both" (193). Like Satan and the reprobate, the orcs in my work act out evil of their own volition, but the direction which these actions are pointed ultimately are beyond their foresight due to their finite nature. Therefore, their deeds are part of a greater good. The good in the story is a good in the most objective sense, even if that good is not for the protagonist or those involved with him. The idea of reprobation is shocking if one concludes that a truly good God would predestine some to be evil and to reap damnation. What appears to be even more contradictory is the idea that those who are predestined are not devoid of actual choices.

How can this be? Perhaps the most prevalent example of reprobation of the wicked in Scripture is Pharaoh, whose heart was said to have been hardened by God. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all dealt with this difficult passage, arriving at very similar conclusions. Augustine argued that Pharaoh's wickedness was judged by God, and this judgment caused the monarch of Egypt to harden himself of his own free-will (*Reformation of the Church (1300-1700)*, Pelikan 223). Luther, on the other hand, argued that Pharaoh did not have the freedom to heed the command of God because God hardened his heart out of necessity (*Reformation of the Church (1300-1700)*, Pelikan 223). Calvin, taking influence from both Augustine and Luther, asserted that Pharaoh had been "turned over to Satan" because of his obstinacy (*Reformation of the Church (1300-1700)*, Pelikan 223). The three theologians' views would appear contradictory, but there is a harmony that connects all of them. Pharaoh, due to the effects of Original Sin, was already wicked by nature. He is not disparaged by the fact that he is a slave to his fallen nature, but rather revels in it, as demonstrated by his constant refusal to free the Israelites from slavery. Pharaoh, being a sinner and a reprobate, only acts consistently with his nature in the choices he makes. In response to God's judgments, his nature only becomes more obvious. In this way, the sovereign will of God and human choice work in harmony rather than conflict. Pharaoh's actions which follow his hardening are nothing more than he would have done of his own volition, given his wicked nature. In this way, the protagonist of my story is hardly different. He is a creature who is wicked by nature, and his reprobation is only the natural progression of his wickedness. However, his evil is necessary for the propagation of the ultimate good. Strangely

enough, it seems that even this concept of the predestination of the wicked serving the favor of the good did not escape *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien makes a stunning twist in the story when Frodo's notorious foil, the creature Gollum, is ultimately the one who unintentionally destroys the ring of power when Frodo fails to do so (*The Return of the King* 240). Tolkien himself admits that it was an "act of grace" wherein the evil intent and actions of a truly wicked creature served to bring about the greatest good for both Frodo and the whole of Middle Earth (Krivak 10). In this thesis, the predestination of evil is shown not to be merely an act of indignation towards the reprobate, but also an act of mercy and a benefit for those under grace.

THE SERVANT OF DARKNESS

Prologue

Her eyes blinked rapidly as discomfort pulled her from sleep. Little Mara awoke inside her family's farmhouse. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, so she was able to see fairly clearly. Her older brother was sleeping in the same bed, his backside turned to her as he snored. The house lay still and quiet. Momma and Da were asleep downstairs in their own bed in the common room. Mara and her brother's bed was at the top of the wooden ladder staircase in the upper room. They were poor; the room was also a storage area. In the corner was a drying stack of tobacco leaves which made the room smell sickly sweet, and next to that a large sack full of turnips she and her brother had harvested earlier when it was still daylight.

Mara rolled to her side, careful not to disturb her brother, asleep on the same straw-stuffed mattress. She put her feet on the wooden floor and a chill ran up her legs all the way to her spine. It was cold in the room. She flicked a strand of golden hair out of her face as she made her way to the stairs, avoiding the floorboards that were prone to creaking loudly. In the dark, she descended the stairs. Reaching the bottom, she could hear Momma and Da breathing far off in the corner, the dying coals in the fireplace outlining them like silhouettes. Slivers of moonlight pierced through the cracks in the shutters which helped her to avoid the other creaking floorboards until she reached her exit. Mara was cautious as she slid the bolt in the door. It snagged at one point. To loosen it, she had to put all her weight on it, but when she did so, it squeaked. Da breathed out a long moan as the sound disturbed him. Though she could barely see him

in the dark, she was able to make out his figure rolling over as he slept. The squeak had not awakened him, nor Momma. Mara did not open the door all the way, only enough for her to slip out and into the cool night air. Her feet touched the ground, sending another shiver up her spine as Mara stepped onto the wet, dew-sprinkled grass. Outside, she could see the moon, bright and full in the sky, which illuminated her family's little farm house.

Looking about, Mara sought a suitable spot for what she had to do. Her bladder had awakened her, and she needed a place to relieve it. She decided that the barn was the closest and safest place. During the day, she and her family chose spots out in the woods, but at this hour, even a mere stroll to the edge of the nearby forest was dangerous. Da had often warned her of wolves and other night creatures, things that frightened her to think about. She kept a watchful eye as she walked to the barn. If Da or her brother went anywhere outside at night, they would take the axe used to split logs for protection, but it was too heavy for a little girl to carry.

Suddenly, she felt a wetness soak her hand, followed by something warm and sticky. She nearly yelped at the sudden fright, but the cry died in her throat when she realized who was. It was their big shepherd dog, affectionately called "Thatch" since his shaggy hair resembled the material used for roofing houses. She smiled as she petted the big dog on his massive head. Thatch had wandered into their farm as a pup, and, at first, Da had wanted to get rid of him. But when Mara and her brother had taken a liking to him, Da kept him on and trained him to stand guard over the house and the farm's animals. Thatch licked her face and smeared it with warm slobber. Mara suppressed a

laugh as she told the big dog to stop. When he calmed down, she signaled for him to follow her as she continued on her way.

When she reached the barn, she found a suitable spot outside, hiked up her long linen shift, squatted, and urinated in the grass, careful to keep her legs apart so she did not wet them. Thatch sat nearby, scratching his ear with his wide paw. Looking up at the sky, Mara could see the bright, white face of the full moon accompanied by twinkling, silver stars. It was a beautiful night, and it was the first time she had not been frightened to go outside this late.

As Mara conducted her business, Thatch stopped his scratching and perked up his ears. His head turned in the opposite direction facing away from her. The dog stood, the fur on the back of his neck rising and his ears pointing backward. There in the dark, Mara could hear a low rumbling growl rise from Thatch's throat. It first rumbled softly and menacingly, but then grew loud and angry, his lips drawing back into a toothy snarl. "What is it, Thatch?" Mara said softly. The big dog made no reply or acknowledgement that she was there, and focused all of his attention on something in the dark. Thatch hunched his shoulders and began to pace forward, still growling and angry. After only a few steps, the dog bolted into a full run towards whatever had alerted him, his loud bellowing bark echoing in the night. Mara stood as her furry companion ran away. Once he was swallowed by the dark, she called out, "Thatch!" The only answer was a sharp whimper that dogs make when they are injured. Silence fell, and all was quiet. She could not be sure, but the silence led her to believe that Thatch was dead. Mara felt frozen in her place, but her head told her to run and hide. The house was too far for her to reach

without being seen by whatever was out there. She was already hidden in the shadow of the barn, so she clung to the wall and crept swiftly to the door.

Carefully, she lifted the wooden plank that barred the barn door and tossed it aside. Inside, the barn was dark, but the moon shining through the widow in the hayloft gave her enough light to see. Lighting the lantern would have helped her to see, but she dared not lest whatever had killed Thatch be drawn to it. Their plow horse, milk cow, and pigs that slept in the barn stirred at her presence. The horse give a muted whiny as it stood and looked at her curiously. *Shsssh!* Mara hushed the horse, holding her finger over her mouth as she began to climb up the ladder that led to the loft. At the top, she ran to the window and peered out of the corner in the direction where Thatch had run. She did not have to wait long until she noticed something, or rather, “somethings” emerge from darkness, treading through the mist. In the moonlight, she saw a dozen dark figures. They were all clad in black from head to toe. What exactly they were wearing she couldn’t quite make out, but one thing she could see was their glowing yellow eyes which reflected the moonlight like wild animals. *Bad things*, she thought. She could hear them talking quietly among themselves. The sounds were strange, a mixture of the vaguest forms of words and the grunting of feral beasts. As the dark shapes came closer, she felt an overwhelming sense of fear overtake her.

Mara turned and leapt into the haystack that her father and brother had stored in the loft, covering every inch of herself. She wanted to scream out to warn her family. With Thatch no longer able to alert them, they were as vulnerable as chickens before a fox, but she dared not scream for fear that the bad things would hear her. She could hear

the grunts and snarls growing louder. Listening closely, she could make out what sounded like words of some kind. What the bad things were saying, she did not know, and what tongue they were speaking she could not tell. Not long after, she heard a loud crash followed by loud whoops, yells, and growls. Mixed among the sounds, she could hear the scream of her mother, and the yells of her father. She heard another loud voice in a tongue which she could understand: “Momma! Da!” It was the voice of her brother. His words turned into screams which soon joined those of her parents, the voices of the bad things growing louder and drowning them out. Moments later, the screams of her family ceased with a sound she recognized, the same sound she heard when her da butchered a pig. It was the sound that steel makes as it cuts flesh. *Schlick!* The bad things’ sounds became louder after her family was silenced. A second crash was heard. This time, it was close, very close. It was soon followed by the loud grunts, snarls, and the strange words of the bad things. She could not see them, but Mara knew they were in the barn. The animals down below began to go mad. It was as if a wolf had invaded the barn. Mara could hear the horse begin to kick the barn walls and whinny loudly, the cow and the pigs making an even greater ruckus. Like her family, the animals did not cry out for long, for they too were silenced. *Schlick! Schlick! Schlick!* She had never wanted to scream so badly in her life, but Mara knew that the moment she did, she too would be silenced.

The sound of thuds against wood caught her ears, coming closer and closer. Something was climbing the ladder in the loft where she was. Peering through the haystack, she could see the ladder move slightly with every step the bad thing took. She

wanted desperately to look away, but no matter how hard she tried to convince herself to do so, she could not. Soon enough, she saw it peek its ugly head over the ladder. A face as black as burnt flesh, and eyes as yellow as a wolf's, in the dark. The full moon exposed its visage as clear as daylight in the barn. It pulled itself up into the loft, squatting and hunched over. If it stood up, it would have been about four feet tall. It was small by most standards, but it would tower over Mara if she stood next to it. Its hand had left a dark, red smudge on the ladder. The thing's body was gangly. Its arms unnaturally long, most certainly not those of a man. Its hands sported short, pointed claws. The thing's clothes were ragged and torn, and there was a clinking sound when it moved. She could see a shirt made of round steel rings under its tattered clothing. She had only seen soldiers wear such things. Armor, she remembered it was called. Its face was the most horrifying of all. Aside from its glowing yellow eyes, the bad thing sported a thin face with a very flat, almost nonexistent, nose. Its ears were long and pointed, and its hair black and ratty, but the worst part was the smell. It was not a pungent sickening smell; but a strong, overbearing smell. Once again, drawing back to memories of her father butchering pigs in the slaughterhouse, Mara thought it smelled like old dried blood. The smell of the death.

It stopped at the edge of the loft. Squatting on its haunches, the thing placed a hand on the wooden floor. In its other hand, the bad thing held what appeared to be an axe; not the large wood-cutting sort, but a small, crude hatchet with a small square head. The steel was rusted and stained with blood. Listening, she could hear loud sniffs as the thing turned its head to the left and to the right. Its mouth was open as it did so, its

tongue licking the air. That's when Mara could see that it had short yellow fangs aligning its bottom and top jaw. She had remembered hearing of such creatures, but she never believed them to be real. The scariest things she had ever seen were wolves. She had seen the carcass of one that her father had killed up close, a frightening sight indeed, but it paled in comparison to this. Her mother and father both had warned her of things worse than wolves in the woods, but she could never have imagined a horror as terrifying as this. Unable to control her tongue, the word slipped out naturally, yet ever so softly, from her mouth "Orc!" It was the fitting word. The creature looked just as her mother had described to her in bedtime stories.

The orc turned its head towards the haystack, snorting loudly in surprise. Had Mara's face not been covered by the hay, the monster would have been staring at her eye-to-eye. The orc made its way to the haystack slowly, but surely, drawing a long, pointed, black dagger with a tapered blade from its belt. Mara knew that she had made a potentially fatal error. She slowed her breathing in hope that she could hide her breath, but as the monster came closer, her heart beat faster and her pulse threatened to burst out of her throat. She could feel the thing's hot, stinking breath against the skin of her face. Mara held her own breath. She dared not breathe while this nightmare was so close. It sniffed the air, and then gave a low guttural snarl like an angry dog. Without warning, the dagger suddenly thrust forward, the tapered blade punching through the hay, followed by a long continuous squeal. Something stung the side of her face, and something hot and sticky trickled down the side of her cheek. The knife recoiled. She could see the orc's long black arm as it retracted its weapon. She could also see a large,

fat rat impaled on the orc's knife, writhing in pain. Touching the side of her face, Mara pulled her hand away. The knife had cut her when the orc had skewered the rat. The orc stared at its prize with a fixed fascination as the rat wriggled on the blade trying to free itself, squealing pitifully. The ladder unexpectedly began to thud again, and another orc's head came into Mara's view. This orc was bigger, and more ferocious, at least twice the size of the one in the loft. It spoke loudly in words which were, again, a mystery to Mara, but the way it phrased them made it apparent that it was a question. The smaller orc turned its head and answered its bigger fellow. The big orc ended their brief conversation with a few more muddled words and a snarl before jumping down the ladder. The little orc diverted its attention to the rat. With one quick snap of its jaws, the gangly creature bit the rodent in half. Blood oozed from between the orc's lips as he chewed, the bones crunching between his pointed teeth, the rat's entrails and bodily fluids slurped down its throat. The orc finished off the bottom of its vermin morsel, and after a final swallow, he leapt out of the loft.

Mara did not move from her spot, fearing that some of the orcs were hiding in the barn, waiting for her to come out. She waited for a few moments longer before all went quiet. Slowly, she poked her head out of the haystack. When she could see and hear nothing, she pulled herself out. She crept to the edge of the loft, careful not to be seen. On the barn floor, bloodstains had turned the dirt into thick, black mud. Hair, bone, and entrails littered the floor. All the animals were gone, even the plow horse. The orcs had left the barn doors open, and she could hear them faintly in the distance as they talked. Mara froze, careful not to move an inch. The relative silence was broken by shouts. It

was in that strange tongue she had heard earlier, but she heard a consistent word repeated loudly and clearly in harsh guttural voices: “*Ghash!...Ghash!...Ghash!*” It was then that Mara’s nose detected the smell of smoke. She could see the flame of several torches which grew as they ignited the farmhouse and began to grow larger with every passing moment. One of the torches came closer out of the dark. Mara moved backwards, out of the view of whatever was coming. It the large orc she had seen earlier. She could see him fully now. He was at least six and a half feet tall, perhaps taller. His body was extremely hardened, muscles rippling beneath his skin, his yellow eyes and pointed fangs visible in the torchlight. With a loud grunt, he threw the torch into the hayloft.

Mara had a mind to throw the torch out, but the hay was so dry that the flames licked it up swiftly and began to spawn more of the flickering orange tongues. Smoke began to billow, and Mara suppressed a cough. She had to get out of the barn and quickly, or she would be enveloped along with it. The thought of leaving the barn was frightening. She knew the orcs would surely kill her like they had killed her family. She decided that she would stand a better chance of survival if she were to exit through the window. She saw the pulley hanging from the ceiling of the barn, a bucket attached to the rope hanging from it. She grabbed the bucket, pulled the rope to the window, and tossed it out. It fell down the side of the barn, the weight of the bucket pulling it down until the thick knot in the rope kept it from going further. It did not reach the ground by at least six feet, but it was now or never. The flames were roaring louder, and the smoke was growing thicker.

Mara coughed loudly, the roar of the fire drowning her out. Carefully, she grasped the rope with both hands and began to descend from the window. By now, the flames had enveloped the whole loft. The rope was holding the weight of her small body, but her fears became reality as she noticed the flames had already caught onto the rope, licking at the tiny tendrils of hemp. Mara hastened her descent, tears streaming down her face. She was still too high to jump. If she did, she might break a bone, and the orcs would only break more when they found her. She lost her footing, leaving her dangling from the rope by her hands. Quickly, she regained her stability and continued downward. She could see the bucket, the moment when she would drop to the ground only seconds away when it happened.

The hempen rope snapped. As Mara fell, she suppressed her scream. The ground met her with a *thud* as she landed on her back, hitting her head and feeling dazed; but not bad enough to remain where she lay. She rolled to her side, and then slowly stood to her feet. She steadied herself until her vision ceased to be blurry. After a blinking a few times, Mara looked up to see that the entire loft had collapsed. She turned her head to the woods beyond the only world she knew. Not looking back, she ran towards the woods; the woods her parents had warned her about repeatedly. The woods that were full of things that liked to eat little girls. But now, home was full of monsters, and the woods were a welcoming sanctuary.

She ran as fast as her tiny legs could carry her, her blood pumping as the woods came closer. Mara was halfway there when her sprint was halted, and she tripped. Rolling onto her back and propping herself up with her hands, she saw an arrow stuck at

an angle in the ground. Mara noticed that there were two holes in her nightdress. The arrow had passed through her clothing, as if whoever had shot it had wanted to trip her, rather than harm her. Her dread was realized when she saw a figure skulking up to her out of the darkness, snatching up the arrow along the way.

Standing in front of her was an orc about six feet tall. He was dressed in roughly cut, black leather armor that was worn from use, but carefully designed and stitched. His hands were covered in a pair of fingerless leather gloves. A pair of blackened steel greaves covered his legs up to his knees, and on his feet were shoes which left his clawed toes exposed. Peeking over the top of his shoulder was the hilt of a sword, a full quiver of arrows was at his left hip, and in his hand was a short bow. Mara froze as still as stone. As the orc drew closer, she was able to make out his face. At seeing the creature, her fears slightly calmed. It was not nearly as frightening as the other orcs she had seen in the barn. This one's skin was not black, but a sort of ashen gray mixed with a yellow hue. His ears were pointed and long like the other orcs, pierced with crude metal rings; and his long, black hair was pulled back into a rough braid which tumbled down his back. His eyes were the same yellow color of the others, wolf-like and cunning, but it was his face that perplexed Mara most. His face, as odd as it seemed, was not very much like an orc. It was scarred from battles long past, a peculiar scar purposefully cut in some strange pattern on his left cheek; but his nose was a shape that she recognized, like that of a man. He had fangs like an orc, but the two bottom canines protruded from his lower lip like a pair of tusks, as if they were too big for his mouth, the one on the left broken off halfway down. Although his lower jaw was larger and left his mouth partial open, it

fit to his head perfectly like that of a wild boar. From his eyes upward, the orc's face was smooth, and his brow pointed, accentuating his lupine eyes. His body was also vastly different from the other orcs. This one stood upright, straight and tall. His arms were not gangly and disproportionate, but perfectly proportioned, again, like a man. Strangely enough, Mara was more confused at seeing this creature than afraid. His face was fierce, but not full of hatred like the others. He was, somehow, not quite orc and not quite man. Something different entirely.

The strange orc glared at Mara, baring the tusks that were his fangs, yet she was unafraid. Reaching for the hilt over his right shoulder, the orc unsheathed his sword. It had a short blade, about two-and-half feet long. Halfway up the steel, the blade projected outward, a half-moon curvature wider than the palm of a man's hand on the cutting edged which ended in a sharp point, perfectly made for cleaving or stabbing. In the moonlight, Mara could see that the steel was black like jet, but it had a sheen which made it shine in the moonlight. There were some nicks in the blade, but it was well cared for, and sharp. The creature touched the sharp edge to her neck, the cold steel kissing her skin. Mara never turned her face away from the orc, neither did she break her eye-to-eye stare. The orc turned the blade slightly, forcing her to look up. Then he waited. He did not speak, nor make a single sound. He only stared. Tears continued to stream down her face as she awaited the final blow. By the look of the weapon, she knew it would make the kill quick and clean, and for that she was thankful.

Just when she thought her end was near, the orc broke his stare to look over both of his shoulders. He then moved his weapon away and put it back in its scabbard. If

Mara was confused before, she was even more confused now. The orc threw his head to the right, nodding sharply. Mara could not believe her eyes. Was he letting her go? The orc nodded his head again, this time more sharply. She did not know what to do. Was it some sort of ruse? The strange orc snorted loudly, and then, in a low, scratchy voice, he said as plainly as any human, “Go.” Mara was dumbstruck as the orc spoke to her in the common tongue. His speech was broken and rough, yet perfectly lucid. “Go! Run, you little shit!” he snarled. Without another second, Mara jumped to her feet and sped off towards the shelter of the trees, away from the glowing inferno that was once her family’s farm, away from the orcs.

The strange orc watched as the little human girl disappeared from sight. He heard the loud bellow of his clan’s chieftain. “Move out!” he called. “You, bastard. We move!” came the call to him personally. Taking one last look into the woods, he saw that the little human was nowhere to be found. With that, he put his arrow back in the quiver and ran after his fellow orcs, his clan...his family.

Chapter 1

The sun was beginning to rise as they returned to camp. They had raided the farm early that morning, and their reward had been good. They had discovered the farm the day before, and the full moon made the task of slaying the residents easy. The watch dog had nearly given them away, but thanks to quick aim and dead eye, they came in without warning.

Xurek marched at a leisurely pace along with the other members of his clan. In his left hand, he held his short bow along with five arrows, ready to be loosed at a moment's notice. Over his shoulder, he carried the left front foreleg of the big horse they had butchered. For so small a farm, it had contained an abundance of meat. He and his fellow orcs had taken one horse, one cow, two pigs, ten chickens...and three humans. They did not bother with the dog, as the taste of dog meat was not suitable for even an orc palate.

Xurek was fifteen years old, a young adult by orc standards. But, he was also very different. Unlike his kin, he had a defined nose, lighter skin, bottom canines that were too big for his mouth, and an upright posture. This was because he was not an orc, at least, not fully. Xurek was what his kind called a half-orc, the result of the union between a male orc and human female. Of his mother, he knew nothing, other than she was a human and responsible for his finer features which distinguished him from his brethren. He hated that he had human features, as it made him appear to be effeminate. Orc women retained more traits of their elvish ancestors. It often caused others to think

that he might not be entirely male, a slight which he bore even now. His father, Golub, was the chieftain of their clan. He was a tall orc, only slightly more so than Xurek. He was hairless with tar black skin and lupine yellow eyes which matched his fangs. He seemed to be almost an Uruk-hai with his height and bulging muscles, which he claimed his grandsire had been. But where Uruk-hai had shorter pointed ears, his were longer like most goblinkind.

Golub was of a remnant of survivors from a battle which had taken place more than sixty years ago near Lonely Mountain where the great dragon Smaug had once slept. Some called it the Battle of the Five Armies, but to goblinkind, it was known as the Slaughter at Worm's Lair. What had begun as certain victory turned into a slaughter as the men, elves, dwarves, and eagles outflanked their forces and drove them back. Most of their army had been decimated that day. The greatest loss in the battle was Bolg, the high chieftain of the orcish forces. Golub had served faithfully under him as part of his personal guard, but even he could not protect him from the wrath of the man who became a great bear in the battle. He and many of the remaining orcs fled in confusion at seeing their commander dead. Since then, they had formed a roving band of predators which preyed on local farms and villages for their sustenance, calling themselves the Black Blood Clan. As orcs aged and died, or were killed in the raids, other orcs had joined their ranks causing their numbers to swell. All members were marked with a scar that was cut into the flesh; a pattern which consisted of three parallel marks with two diagonal slashes connecting to the middle mark, one at the bottom left, and another at the top right. This was put somewhere onto their bodies where it could be seen like on bare

forearms, but some were brazen enough to have it etched onto their faces. Xurek was one who wore his mark boldly on his left cheek near his jaw.

It was late autumn now, and Golub had strict orders that they were to gather as much food as possible to store up before the winter. There were around three-hundred in the group, all blooded warriors and ruthless killers. Xurek's camp was situated in a small canyon aligned with sharp jagged rocks and cliffs nearly fifty feet tall, nestled on the west side of the Misty Mountains, a great deterrent against humans and their horses. The entrance was a narrow passage where anyone entering or exiting would have to go through no more than double file.

As he and the other raiders approached, the sentries gave a cry of recognition, announcing their return. The two sentries were spindly little orcs from Moria named Vrep and Lop, armed with bows and arrows. Golub put them on sentry watch most often because their small, agile frames made them not easily seen, and helped them to navigate through the crags with ease. For what they possessed in speed and agility, the half-orc found the two lacked in archery skills. They were the best pureblood orc archers the Black Blood Clan had to offer, but Xurek, everyone knew, was the best archer, as good as any elf or human.

Unlike the others, who shot right-handed and placed their arrows on the left side of the bow, Xurek fired from the right side, minimizing his draw time. To quicken his firing even more, he often held up to five arrows in his left hand along with his short bow. His kin, try as they might, could not replicate his style or skill. Rather than admit their inferiority, they often cursed him for their lack of comprehension. Despite his

clan's resentment, Golub found his bow skill extremely valuable. There were few raids Xurek was absent from. His arrows had saved the lives of countless orcs, though they would never admit it. Unfortunately, despite his archery's obvious usefulness, this too made him a target for ridicule. Larger orcs, like some Uruk-hai in his clan, his father, and his elder half-brother Korgak, saw this as a sign of weakness. Many goblinkind relished close-quarter combat with the sword, axe, spear, or mace, seeing the bow as the weapon of cowards. Yet, Xurek was not one to stand on the sidelines and fire. He ran into battle along with his brethren, firing rapidly mere feet from his foes; but the other orcs were too stupid to distinguish his method from that of common orc archers. Xurek was also highly skilled with his short sword, which he carried on his back; seldom did he unsheathe it, and seldom was it noticed.

With the sound of Vrep's and Lop's yelps, and the smell of fresh meat in the air, the other orcs in the camp soon began to cry out in both hunger and excitement. Making their way through the canyon, the raiding party emerged on the other side, greeted by the rest of their clan. Golub was greeted with acknowledgements of his accomplished raid, while the other raiders who carried in the meat were bombarded by orcs who tried to steal it away from them. The larger raiders were able to beat them until they retreated, while the larger agitators made sure that the smaller raiders did not put up a struggle. One small orc ran up to Xurek and attempted to snatch the leg of the horse from him. The half-orc shoved him away and gave him a good kick which staved him off. Seeing their ruckus, Golub let out a very loud roar which echoed throughout the camp. "Bugger

off, scum!” he shouted. Not one orc disputed his order. Each one knew that if they dared disobey, their meat would be added to the winter stores.

Xurek and the others delivered their meat to a group of short goblins, half as tall as a man, who were waiting for them in the smoking tent. It was a large, wide structure made of hides and aligned with rafters on the inside from which the various meats hung from crude iron hooks. In the middle of the tent was large fire pit which was constantly stoked with wood to dry out the meat, the smoke of the fire escaped through a large hole in the top of the tent. The little goblins were almost naked, save for their roughly made leather aprons which were covered with blood stains. Two came to Xurek who handed the horse shank over to them. The half-orc unsheathed his black horn-handled knife and carved out a large piece of meat, enough for two orcs to eat. The goblin workers took the meat away to a wooden table and began to fillet it with their butchering tools into pieces suitable to hang.

With his share of meat secured, Xurek headed towards his shelter. As he walked, he scanned the camp as if looking for something, or rather someone. Before he had a chance to turn his head, Xurek was knocked off his feet and tumbled to the ground. His vision blacked out for a few seconds, but when it returned, he found he could not breathe. A long arm was wrapped around his throat, and a hand shoved its palm into the back of his head. Try as he might to free himself, the vice around his throat only became tighter. A soft, gentle whisper entered his ear, “Yer getting careless, my shadow.” At hearing this, Xurek grinned mischievously, recognizing the voice. There was only one being in all of Middle Earth who ever called him her shadow. He had very little air left

in his lungs and would soon black out for good, but he had enough air to say in a strained voice, “And you’re getting overconfident!” With that, he seized his attacker by the back of her head and slammed her onto the ground, loosening her grip. Xurek sucked in the sweet taste of air as he saw who he had been looking for lying on the ground. Hrasa. Hrasa was a she-orc, three years Xurek’s elder, a head shorter than he. Very rarely did female goblinkind wonder out of their homes, as most were weighed down with bearing children and caring for the orclings they birthed. Hrasa was exceptional. Never had Xurek met an orc more ferocious in battle, or one who was more charming at play. Like most orc females, she was smoothed-skinned and fine featured. If not for her fangs, amber eyes, and clawed fingernails, she would seem to be an elf with tar black skin. To Xurek, she was the most beautiful creature in all of Middle Earth.

Hrasa smiled up at her mate through pointed teeth as he looked down at her, and he smiled back. Before she could make another move, Xurek snatched her up in his arms and bent her over. She snarled, and scratched. Xurek paid no mind to her antics as he reached down and pulled the cloth that covered her buttocks and front quarters down, exposing her backside to him. He then reached down with his free hand and moved his own loin cloth out of the way so that his male parts hung free. Then, on the soft earth and in the presence of those in his clan, he mounted her as a warg mounts his bitch. Hrasa continued to snarl angrily as he thrust into her, but Xurek knew that it was for show, more out of pleasure than anger. The other orcs paid no mind to their coupling, as noisy as it was, continuing to talk and eat normally. Gradually, Hrasa’s apparent snarls of protest turned to sighs of pleasure, and her resistance into submission. At the last of it,

Xurek finished her with three swift thrusts, and then spilled his seed into her womb. Before he came out of her, he slowly thrust twice more, stood to his feet, and readjusted his loincloth. Hrasa stood up and pulled up her breeches, covering herself. This was one of many times that he had taken her. The first was when he was ten, and she thirteen. But, as many times as he had taken her, never once had he gotten a child on her. “You live to kill another day!” said Hrasa, embracing Xurek tightly, sticking her tongue into his ear. Xurek pushed her back gently and licked her face with his black tongue from the base of her neck and up her cheek. “Too bad you missed it,” he said chuckling. Hrasa punched him in his right shoulder. “I’ve brought you meat,” he said. “Then let us taste it,” she replied.

Outside their home, which consisted of a hut made of animal skins, Xurek and Hrasa spitted the horse meat. The meat was cooked only until the outside was darkened, leaving the inside warm, red, and bloody. To finish off their meal, they downed a skin full of orcish wine. It was a thick red liquid that burned as it trickled down the throat, a feeling that made them feel alive and proud to be orcs.

As Xurek ripped away a morsel with his tusk-like lower canines, a shadow fell over the fire. Hrasa had ceased her chatter, and Xurek swallowed the chunk of meat. Standing over their fire, his tall black frame blocking out the sun, was Korgak. Korgak was six feet and seven inches of pure muscle and no brain. Where Golub their father was muscular, Korgak was a mountain of orc flesh with twice the temper, the spitting image of a once younger Golub, but a head taller with long, black hair. Like his father, and his half-brother, he had possessed long, pointed ears...except for one. Where his right ear

had once been, nothing remained but a small, black nub of flesh. Xurek smiled with satisfaction when he saw it. The big orc looked down on his younger half-sibling, his nostrils flaring as he spoke, “You think you are slick, ain’t you, bastard?” Xurek sighed, rolling his eyes. He had seen this behavior before. Korgak was one to let his emotions govern his sensibility. “What do you want, Korgak?” Korgak spat to the side, “I saw what you did,” he said quietly. “What are you talking about?” replied Xurek, ripping off another morsel of meat. “Don’t you play stupid with me, bastard!” Korgak roared. “I saw. You just couldn’t do it, could you? Couldn’t bring in more meat for the clan. That little human pup made you a softy. Don’t even have the balls!” Xurek swallowed another piece of meat and said calmly, “Unlike you who has no control and kills anything that moves? Tell me, do you feel powerful killing an unarmed whelp?” With that, Korgak let out angry roar, puffed out his chest, and lurched forward: “I’ll kill you, you elf-blooded scum!” Xurek leapt to his feet and met his half-brother head on, bearing his fangs and snarling. Both shoved one another’s heads together, Korgak bearing down on his smaller half-brother. “You can try, you blackened shit pile!” Xurek said. “Xurek, come away!” said Hrasa, trying to pull him away. Korgak shoved him to the ground and loomed over him. Where his brother was all muscle, Xurek was trim, light, and fit, which made him fall over when pushed by the massive hand of his older half-brother. “Don’t you sass me, you little wart! Or I’ll carve out that lying tongue of yours!” To his half-brother’s threats, his only reply was the unsheathing of his knife as he stood. Some of Korgak’s friends had come to watch what was sure to be a death match. “Oh! The bastard wants to grow some balls,” said Korgak grabbing his groin and giving it a squeeze as the other

orcs laughed along with him. “No!” Hrasa whispered in Xurek’s ears as his wrath burned hotter. Before he could strike, a low rumbling bellow sounded “Enough!” Golub had come out of nowhere and stood between the two of them. “You two are always going at each other. What is it this time?” “The bastard deprived us of meat for our winter store,” said Korgak. “What?” Golub replied, confused. “There was a fourth human at the farm, and your bastard couldn’t do her in!” shouted Korgak. Golub turned his head to his other offspring, “This true?” Xurek relaxed his hand and quietly said, “It was a little female. A scrawny thing, not worth our effort.” Without a warning, his father backhanded him across the face, leaving a tendril of black blood dripping down the corner of his lip. “I am the one who decides what is worth our effort! I want no more of this banter from you two. Am I clear?” Golub shouted angrily. Without a word, Korgak turned and left, just as angry as he had been before. Xurek, however, wiped the blood from his lip and spat black saliva on the ground. Before he could look up, his father seized him by the leather baldric which carried his short sword and jerked him forward. “There will be no more mistakes from you. Or I’ll let Korgak have you. ‘M’I clear?” Xurek only nodded a yes.

As night fell, Xurek and Hrasa sat outside the hut. He had stripped off his armor, but his weapons were close by. Tonight, Korgak and his gang of marauders had broken out the stronger drink and had drunk themselves into a stupor. But when their thirst for liquor was satiated, their thirst turned to blood. Among the light of the campfires, he could see Korgak standing in a circle of jeering orcs. He was bare-chested and spattered with blood—some his own, but mostly not. Opposite of him was another orc, slightly shorter than he, also bare-chested. What had started with jests had soon turned to insults

which led to the spectacle they saw now. Xurek and Hrasa watched as the opposing orc charged Korgak, his balled fist connecting with his lower jaw, followed by another. Korgak turned his head and shook off the pain, not even defending himself. The opposing orc threw another punch, but his hand was caught by Xurek's taller half-brother. With his opposite hand, Korgak's gigantic fist pummeled his opponent like a hammer, one...two...three. A fourth blow landed, and this one knocked out several of his opponent's teeth. The opposing orc's eyes rolled back in his head. He was dazed badly. Korgak had locked his opponent's left arm with his right, rendering it useless. The opposing orc feebly threw another fist which landed on Korgak's right brow. Angry, Korgak delivered a head-butt to his enemy which connected with a loud *thud*. Then, Korgak forced him to his knees. Reaching down into his opponent's mouth, he grabbed hold of his tongue and ripped it out. The defeated orc fell to the ground writhing in pain, blood running down his face while Korgak held his grisly prize over his mouth and let the blood fill his gaping maw before tossing aside. Golub came forward, giving a kick to the defeated orc, laughing as he handed a skin of liquor to his son. Korgak had always been his father's son. Everything Golub did was to secure Korgak's future place as chieftain of the Black Blood Clan. By the looks of it, he was becoming what his father had groomed him to be. Violent, brutal, merciless, stone-hearted, and iron-fisted. Korgak would have to be strong when Golub died if he was to rule the clan. A leader was decided by strength, and if any were to challenge Korgak, he would have to be far stronger, and far crueler, than he was.

At the end of it all, Xurek spit into the fire with disgust, the coals hissing back at

him in retaliation. Reaching for his short sword, he took his whetstone and gave it three gentle strokes before testing the edge with his finger. Finally, he pointed the blade forward, the flames of the fire dancing on the shiny black steel, before putting it back into its scabbard. "Is it true?" he heard Hrasa say. "What?" Xurek replied. "The human female. Did you really...let it go?" Xurek sighed. He had always confided in Hrasa, he loved her, but she was truly a warrior at heart, a killer. Though she understood much about him, he knew that she probably would not understand what he was about to admit. "Yes, yes I did, Hrasa." The she-orc slapped him on the back of the head, and he snarled. "Fool! What ails you to be so weak?!" she said. "I couldn't do it, Hrasa." "They're humans, Xurek. Scum! Little pink bags of bloated flesh! They hate us, and would do no less." Xurek swallowed a deep breath of air before saying, "She was a child. She was unarmed. She was unable to defend herself." "But she will grow up! She will become a woman and birth more of those maggots! You had no right to..." "Hrasa!" Xurek said sharply. She fell silent as he gritted his fangs at her, her face shifting from a mixture of anger and disappointment to a near calm, but also showing signs of caution. Very few times had she seen Xurek angry, but when he was, she was careful to stay out of his way. His face went from angry to sorrowful. "Hrasa, have you ever felt dispirited for killing an enemy? Even once?" "No. An enemy is for one thing. Killing!" she replied. "Nor I. But when I looked at that little human, I did not see an enemy. I saw a child. A frightened child who wanted her mother and father. She was no threat. She was not a fighter, much less a killer." Xurek could see by Hrasa's face that he was not making any progress in getting her to understand his actions. It was the same with everyone in the

Black Blood Clan. Many things he could comprehend were a mystery to them. “You’re getting soft,” she said. Xurek snarled at her, “Mind your tongue! I am not soft! I see no sense in killing someone who cannot fight me back. There is no challenge, nor sport in it.” With that, Hrasa went quiet.

Looking into the fire, Xurek poked a stick into the glowing coals and rekindled the flames before saying, “I have enough enemies. I need no more than I can lay down already.” “Be thankful that you have enemies,” Hrasa said. “Some have none to speak of.” “Try having enemies like mine, Hrasa” said Xurek turning his gaze towards the crowd where his father and half-brother stood among a circle of blood-drunken, rambling orcs; and her gaze followed. Slowly, the she-orc moved closer to her consort and began to rub his arm up and down, calming his ire. Xurek loved her with all that was him. She was the only one of clan that called him by his name, but even with her well-meant attempts to understand his explanations, she never could quite grasp him. It seemed that it was what partly what made him so attractive to her. He was mysterious, and unlike the others. “I love you, Xurek ...” she said after licking the side of his face with her black tongue. “You have much iron in your blood, my shadow, but I fear that sometimes you are not an orc,” she said in jest. Xurek turned his face towards her, his manner static and hard as stone. His face also had a hint of sadness which lay buried beneath his scars. “I am not an orc,” he said quietly before standing. Hrasa realized her mistake and called after him, “Xurek, wait!” But the half-orc paid her no mind as he skulked out of the camp.

Xurek had paced far from the camp until the light of the fire was out of sight, and only the pale moonlight served as his guiding beacon. He passed the two sentries, Vrep and Lop, as they sat gnawing on a haunch of pig shank, and then climbed his way up the crags that surrounded the camp. The night was quiet, save for a few chirping crickets. Atop of the rocky crags, Xurek marched about a hundred paces until he came to the place he was looking for. Atop the rocky outface was a lone flat boulder overlooking the forest. It was his contemplative sanctuary, a place where he came to think and ponder. He sat down when he reached the stone, drawing out his short sword and laying it across his lap. Xurek looked up at the sky, staring at the bright, white face of the moon. It was beautiful this night, despite the way he felt. Picking up his sword, Xurek grasped it by the hilt and set the tip on the ground, twirling it as it ground into the stone. He turned his attention back to the moonlight, twirling his blade all the while. “‘Not an orc,’ she says,” he said before being interrupted by a sudden pain in his left heel. “Agh! Damn it!” He had spun the sword too closely and cut himself with it. It was little more than a nick, but it stung like the venom of a wasp. “Damn it!” Xurek cursed once again, examining his wound. “Not an orc?” he heard a voice call out. Looking up from his wound, he turned his head to see who had said it, but found no one. He was not sure from which direction it had come, but he knew who it was. He looked to his left and saw the huge shadow of a large wolf-like creature with peering, glowing white eyes. It was his oldest friend, the warg, Moonpaw.

Unlike most creatures, wargs spoke with their heads, rather than their tongues, which is why it was so difficult to tell which direction they came from. Moonpaw got his

name because he was born with two of his middle toes missing on his left front paw which created a crescent moon patten in the earth when he took as step. Xurek smiled as the big wolf-like canine padded up to him and sat down, wagging his short tail. He was an old warg with graying fur and a scarred face from numerous fights. Their scars were something that Moonpaw and Xurek had in common, but the similarities ended there. Xurek stroked the big canine's fur and scratched his ear as the he sat down. "Hello, Moonpaw", he said without uttering a word with his tongue. "What ails you, young pup?" said Moonpaw. Xurek scoffed, "What doesn't ail me these days, old friend?" Moonpaw let out a low rumbling growl that was his laugh: "Something ails you more than usual this night, young pup." Xurek knew he could not hide his feelings from the warg. Moonpaw had lived more life than Xurek had, and had protected him when he was only an orcling. Xurek was appreciative of that, as his older half-brother Korgak always had it out for him. There had been one incident where Moonpaw had come nearly too late to protect him from his half-brother's wrath, something the old warg still had not forgiven himself for. He was more a father to Xurek than Golub. Besides Hrasa, Moonpaw probably knew him best. He understood something about Xurek which no else could, for they were both outcasts. Moonpaw had once been the proud patriarch of a once powerful warg pack before being beaten and cast out by two younger, more resilient, though weaker, males.

"I don't belong here, Moonpaw," said Xurek sighing. "You've been singing that song for some time, young pup. Yet, you still remain here with your clan." "I know that, old friend, but it's one thing when members of your clan see you as a freak; it's another

when someone you actually give an rat's arse about feels the same." "Hrasa?" asked Moonpaw. Xurek turned his face away. The old warg knew him well, sometimes too well. A moment of silence passed as Xurek rubbed his temples with his fingers as if he had a terrible headache. He then took a deep breath before speaking again, "Yes...Hrasa. I've been called freak, weakling, and bastard hundreds of times, but never have I been told that I'm not an orc before." "Are you?" Moonpaw asked, cocking his head to the left. "Am I what?" Xurek asked, confused. "Are you an orc?" Where Xurek had been upset before, he was angry now. For now, it seemed that even the few friends he had were turning against him. He shoved the big canine with the palm of his hand. "Damn you, Moonpaw!" he said angrily. "Well, are you?!" Moonpaw shot back snarling. The subtle sadness that had plagued Xurek his whole life came over him. "Moonpaw! You know damned well what I am, and where I came from. Golub is my father, true, but my mother...my mother...I don't know who she is, or even if she still lives. I doubt it, knowing Golub. A human! The very creatures whose lands we raid, whose women and children we kill, and whose flesh we eat! The very thing that goblankind despise! That's my breeding!" Another moment of silence fell before he spoke to his canine friend. "Why do I even live, Moonpaw? Golub once said that he had considered eating me when he took me from my mother...or took her from me, for that matter...I'm not like the others. Hrasa is right, I'm not an orc." "And that is a bad thing?" Moonpaw retorted. Xurek opened his mouth, but found the words he had conjured up dying stillborn in his throat. He stared away from the warg, pondering the question. "Well?" Moonpaw asked. "What do you mean by that?" asked Xurek in return. "Is not being like the others so

terrible?” Moonpaw asked. His prying seemed to be never-ending. Again, answered with silence, Moonpaw began to speak again, “You do not waste time killing weaklings. You save strength for greater enemies. You are skilled with that bow of yours, and faster than any orc in the Black Blood Clan; and no one can comprehend how you do it. Everything you make is superior to the other orcs’ craft, be it armor or weapons. You are also better looking than all of them.” Xurek snorted in a guffaw of laughter at Moonpaw’s last remark, but the truth of his words began to sink in. All he said was, in fact, fact.

“Besides, do you want to be like your half-brother? Korgak is fierce and strong, but he has no ball sack. He intimidates and motivates out of fear.” The warg’s remark about Korgak made Xurek turn his head. “What you lack in orcishness, you make up for in other ways,” the warg said. “You may very well not be an orc, or a human, but you might be more than just a freak. You might be something more...something unique.”

Xurek sighed loudly and touched the tip of his still whole tusk before replying, “But still a freak.” Moonpaw stretched his legs and let out a long yawn, bearing his sharp, gleaming fangs: “Well, think on that. And know this, Hrasa is not out to harm you. She cares for you, young pup.” The warg turned his back to Xurek and began to make his way down the crag. “Where are you going?” Xurek inquired. “The night is young, and the prey is fresh.” The half-orc watched until Moonpaw padded off out of sight into the woods.

Chapter 2

Eleven Years Ago

At only four years old, Xurek stood four-and-a-half feet tall. His brother, Korgak, was always a head taller. Throughout his years of running with the Black Blood Clan, of which his father was chieftain, Xurek had been something of an oddity. It did not take him long to realize that he was different, nor did it take long for his older half-brother to realize it. Korgak had always been a bully. Ever since Father, who expected to be called by his name, had brought him home, a jealous rage had nestled itself inside Korgak's heart.

Xurek sat down with the new bow he had made from a yew tree. He had applied the finishing resin to it the night before and, now that it was dry, it was ready to be tested. Carefully, he began to string the bow. The pull was hard, and on his first try, he lost his strength and was unable to do it. Gathering his strength for a second try, Xurek bent the bow with his left hand and began to pull the string with his right. On his second try, he was able to pull the string over the top end, the bow snapping into place. Xurek smiled a large toothy grin at the weapon he had spent so much time making. He had used a bow made for younger orcs, but now he had grown enough that he was able to use an adult-sized bow.

Exhilarated, the half-orc put on his quiver and nocked an arrow. As he set out to practice, a movement caught his eye. Sitting on the branch of a nearby tree was a very fat pigeon. It was a small target, but pigeons were very tasty. Taking aim, he loosed an

arrow at the bird. The arrow struck the branch, just inches from the target, the sharpened metal head burying itself into the wood. The pigeon took flight, and Xurek ran towards the branch and snatched up his arrow, never taking his eyes off the bird. He gave chase, waiting for it to land. It was not long before the pigeon found a large upright stone and perched itself upon it. Once it settled, Xurek drew back the drawstring of his bow, took aim, and fired. The arrow struck the tip of the stone, just below the bird's feet. Xurek was beginning to realize his aim was off. The draw for this bow was stronger than his old one, and the frame larger. He was failing to accommodate for the new challenges that his weapon presented. He found his arrow, but the stone had broken the steel tip off, rendering it useless. Hurriedly, he nocked a fresh arrow. With his target in flight, Xurek took after it again. This time, the bird flew towards a crowded area of camp. Again, never losing sight of the feathered fiend, Xurek watched as the bird settled on an unoccupied, crudely shaped table. There were scraps of food left on it, half-empty cups of wine and liquor, gnawed bones with bits of meat left on them, and crumbs from dark moldy bread. It was the bread that attracted the pigeon, for when it landed it began to peck at the crumbs. Seeing that the bird had forgotten it was being hunted, Xurek stopped and took a deep breath. This time, he knew that he had to pull the string back harder and take aim at something smaller on the pigeon, rather than its plump breast which was the largest part of his target. He knew that he should not hold the string back for long as it would strain his muscles. He would have to make the shot with one fluid pull and release. Xurek's eyes locked on to the pigeon's tiny head. He took a deep breath, and in one fell sweep, he released the string, the arrow flying forward. The shot

was straight and true. The bird saw the arrow coming, but it was too late. The arrow struck it directly in the breast. Xurek threw his arms in the air and began to cry loudly at his accomplishment, but it was short lived. The arrow had not stopped upon striking the pigeon. It passed clean through the bird, staining the fletching red, and traveled onward until it imbedded itself into the chest of an orc on the other side. The orc was one that Xurek recognized. A brute of an orc named Sagut, equal in size to Korgak. What was worse for Xurek was that Sagut was his half-brother's closest companion, and they were more like brothers than he and Korgak.

When the arrow struck, Sagut dropped like a gunny sack full of nails. He screamed out in pain, grasping at the wound as black blood oozed from his flesh. Korgak knelt and helped support his friend's head. Sagut's cries of pain soon turned to coughing, and along with the cough came more blood, this time from his mouth. The arrow had penetrated the left side of his chest. For a misplaced, unintended shot, it was a well-placed kill, for it had punctured his lung and sliced the lower part of his heart. It wasn't long before Sagut's coughs turned to bloody gasps for breath, and then silence. Xurek's eyes widened, and his complexion turned pale as snow when Sagut expired. Korgak dropped the body of his friend and rose to his full height, a head taller than Xurek. "You half-bred little pusswart!" Korgak bellowed as he made his way towards him. Xurek stood frozen in place. His elder half-brother had beaten him before. There had been many a time they had fought, and each time, he had been left bloodied and bruised. Once, Korgak had beaten him within an inch of his life for using a new knife that Golub had given him.

By now, the ruckus had attracted the attention of some adult orcs in the camp, who began to watch. Korgak snatched his younger half-brother's bow from his hand and tossed it away. He then seized him by the strap of his leather harness and pulled him forward. "You find that funny? Killing Sagut?!" Korgak growled, spittle flying onto Xurek's face and stinking breath permeating his nostrils. "No! No, brother, is was an accident!" Xurek replied desperately. "I'm not your damned brother!" With that retort, Korgak lobbed his heavy fist into Xurek's jaw. His knuckles broke off half of Xurek's protruding left canine, blood leaking out of his mouth. Xurek was dazed from the heavy punch, but before he could get back to his feet, Korgak came again, "Sagut was my brother!" and he delivered a kick to Xurek's ribs which sent his half-orc sibling rolling across the ground. By now, the other orcs who were watching began to jeer, laugh, and egg on the spectacle. Through his agony, Xurek heard the unmistakable sound of steel scraping a scabbard. Turning his head, he could see that his elder half-brother had drawn a knife, the same knife Korgak had beaten him over. A spark of urgency lit up the half-orc's mind as he saw what was coming for him. He wanted to move, get to his feet, and run as fast as he could, but the pain would not allow him to do so. He felt Korgak grab him by the hair and yank him upward so that his throat was exposed, and the rusty blade of the knife lay across it. "Kill you, bastard," Korgak said quietly. As if by instinct, or unheard encouragement, Xurek kicked his right leg upward, his foot landing on his elder half-brother's flat nose, bloodying it. His legs were longer and more spindly than most orcs, which made such a feat easy for him to accomplish. This caused Korgak to release his grip, and Xurek wasted no time in getting to his feet. "It was an accident, Korgak.

There is no need of this,” he pleaded. “I’ll show you accident!” Korgak said, wiping the blood from his nose and rushing forward. He slashed at him with his knife, but Xurek was quick on his feet. Korgak delivered repeated slashes, his anger growing ever hotter. But for every slash and stab he attempted, Xurek evaded. “Stop!” the half-orc shouted, while continuing to avoid Korgak’s attacks. No matter how much he pleaded with his elder half-brother, he would not hear him. In retaliation, Xurek threw a heavy knuckled fist to his half-brother’s face. “Stop!” Evading another slash, Xurek hit Korgak in the nose again. More blood gushed out. “I said STOP!” No matter how many times Xurek struck his half-brother and demanded he stop, Korgak kept coming. Xurek dodged another slash, but before he could send another punch to Korgak’s face, Xurek felt himself knocked off his feet, and a fist began to pommel his face over and over. His vision grew blacker with every passing fist until he lost consciousness. Korgak stood over the unmoving body of his half-brother. He raised his arms and began to shout out loud bellows, which many of the onlookers acknowledged in turn: “I’m not gonna kill this whelp, I’m gonna make a few adjustments...starting with his balls!” Korgak turned and reached for Xurek’s loincloth, but something happened he did not expect. A tight grip latched onto his wrist. A second later, Xurek wrapped his legs around his half-brother’s arm and threw his weight forward. Korgak hit the ground, his arm locked in a tight vice that twisted and contorted it, pain shooting through his body. Korgak’s free hand began to smack the half-orc in the shoulder, obviously aiming for his face. Wanting to end the fight, Xurek pulled hard on Korgak’s arm until he heard a sudden, sharp *snap!* He had not broken his half-brother’s arm, but the muscle and sinew of it had torn like an

old garment. Korgak howled as a fresh pain overtook the lesser pain he had felt earlier. Feeling that his opponent was done, Xurek leapt his feet. “You bone-headed fool!” he said spitting out bloody saliva and turning his back to leave. That was a mistake. In a flash, Korgak leapt up quickly, and his muscled, whole arm coiled around Xurek’s neck like a large black serpent. Xurek could barely breathe. “I ain’t done with you!” Korgak growled. With every breath the half-orc struggled to breath, his half-brother’s choke became tighter. “Here’s my accident, ‘brother,’” said Korgak sardonically. “I’m going to give you a brother’s embrace, so tight that it chokes the life outta you!” Xurek had always feared that either his father or half-brother would be the death of him, but if he was going to die by their hand, it was going to be in combat, and not like this, choked to death like a cheap whore. Angry, Xurek let go of his half-brother’s arm, the grip becoming tighter. The half-orc threw up his arms, put a firm grip to the back of Korgak head, and pulled it downward exposing his right ear. With what breath remained in his lungs and what energy he had left in his body, Xurek bit down onto the pointed black ear, digging his sharp fangs into the flesh. Then, Xurek shook his head, like a wolf when it grabs a rabbit. He kept doing so until his teeth ripped Korgak’s ear free, leaving only a small black nub of bloody flesh, the half-orc’s mouth filling with blood. Korgak released his grip, and Xurek breathed in fresh air. His opponent lay on the ground writhing at the third wound he’d received. Xurek looked at him in rage. He could taste flesh, and remembered that he still had Korgak’s ear in his mouth. The taste of raw flesh and blood made him tempted to eat it, but he spat it out and licked the blood from his lips. However, Xurek’s sudden feelings of victory died when Korgak stood back to his feet

and snatched up his knife. Before Xurek knew what was happening, his half-brother was on him, his foot connecting with his face. The young half-orc went flying through the air before landing on the ground. He had bitten his tongue when he landed, and his own blood began to fill his mouth. Rolling to his belly, Xurek tried desperately to get to his feet, but then he felt Korgak's heavy foot plant itself firmly on his back and drive him into the earth like a tent spike. "Time to die, carrion!" Korgak said raising the knife with his good hand. Through his blurred vision, Xurek saw the shadow of the knife rising, but before it could move an inch, something large and hairy knocked Korgak off his feet, the knife falling from his hand.

Rolling onto his back and sitting up, Xurek could see that his rescuer had been none other than his friend, Moonpaw. The big warg had knocked Korgak off of his feet, and landed cleanly on top of him, his massive paw resting firmly on the young orc's chest. "You alright, young pup?" Moonpaw asked. "I'm fine," said Xurek to his canine friend, wiping the blood from his face and standing. He spotted the knife on the ground and quickly snatched it up should anyone else want to use it on him. Moonpaw opened his wide maw full of sharp, pointed teeth; a deep, angry growl rising from his gullet and echoing in his throat. The warg's great yellow eyes glared at his prey, "You stinking little maggot! Give me a good reason why I shouldn't rip off your head?!" Korgak looked absolutely terrified as the giant wolf ogled him as if he were a live sheep under his foot. Xurek could smell the fetid scent of urine. Looking to his half-brother, he could see that he was pissing himself. When there nothing left for him to expel, the even

fowler smell of shit filled the air as Korgak began to soil himself. Xurek was unsure, but he felt that this was the end for his half-brother, which he didn't mind in the least.

“What goes on here?!” At seeing both his offspring bloodied and bruised, one under the paw of a warg, Golub became infuriated. “Get back, Moonpaw. Up!” he said shoving the warg aside and yanking Korgak to his feet. Golub obscured his face, obviously smelling the filth in his son's pants. “Now, I said, ‘What goes on here?’” Korgak stood slouched over, grasping his wounded arm. “He killed Sagut!” said Korgak nodding at the body of his dead friend not far off. “You do that?” Golub asked Xurek. “It was an accident, Da”, he replied. Golub marched over to Xurek and backhanded him. “My name is Golub, chieftain of the Black Blood Clan, you will call me such! Give me that!” he said snatching the knife from his bastard. “Now, I want no more of this between you two, or I'll start taking fingers off the both of you, one by one,” said Golub. “But, he took off my ear!” Korgak shouted, pointing at the wound on the right side of his head. “And you let him do it! Become a better fighter. For now, get to the surgeon. The rest of you, get back to work,” Golub retorted.

The crowd of orcs dissipated, and Xurek picked up his bow and the arrows that had spilled everywhere during the fight. “Xurek,” came Golub's voice, “You forget your place. I am your sire, not your da. You are my bastard, not my son. Remember that, bastard.” Moonpaw began to lick the half-orc's wounds as Golub and the others vacated the area.

From that moment on, to every orc in his company, he was bastard. Not Xurek, not you, not even whelp. He was bastard to one and all. That is, all but Moonpaw and

Hrasa. That was the first day that he met his mate, who also was the only orc to help him patch his wounds.

Chapter 3

As they slept inside their hut, Xurek lay dreaming next to Hrasa. He dreamed that they had left the Black Blood Clan and started a life of their own. They had stolen some of the spoils from a previous raid and set up a farm house far away from any land known to him in Middle Earth. While Hrasa prepared the meal, he had just returned home from a hunt, a gutted deer slung across his shoulders. Alas, there were no children there to greet him, not even in his dreams, only Hrasa and their little house. Upon his arrival, Hrasa set aside her utensils, ran to her lover, and embraced him. He greeted her with a lick to her cheek, and she in turn licked at his neck. When they finished their embrace, he looked into her face and stroked her cheek. She smiled up at him, her fangs showing through her mischievous grin. He smiled back, his tusk-like canines jutting upward.

The dream that had begun pleasantly turned to horror. Hrasa's eyes widened, her mouth hanging open. "Hrasa?" he said to her as her body began to collapse. Holding her in his arms, he felt a warm, sticky feeling on his skin. Looking down, Xurek could see that blood sopped Hrasa's body, blackening her clothing and staining his own. He felt her breath leave, and her body go limp. He began to panic. Before he had a chance to mourn his mate's passing, the smell of smoke struck his nostrils. Looking up, he could see the house was on fire. Hrasa dead, the house on fire, what could be worse? It was much too horrible for him to process, and he began to scream at the top of his lungs.

Xurek sat up on his stuffed mat bed. It had been a dream. Only a dream. Nothing more. “What is it?” Hrasa said, suddenly. “Nightmare...just...nightmare...,” Xurek replied, wiping the cold sweat from his brow. He sniffed as he wiped the sweat from his cheeks, and there it was. He sniffed again. It was there, the unmistakable smell of smoke. Was he still dreaming? No. He was wide awake, but the smell he had sensed in his dream still clung to his nostrils. “You smell that?” he said sniffing the air again. Hrasa sniffed loudly once, and then again. “Smoke!” she said.

The two scrambled for their weapons and armor as quickly as they could. Xurek put on his armor and strapped on his belt which held his quiver and knife, removing the arrows and grasping them in his bow hand. Then, he slung on his sword baldric. Hrasa followed suit with her armor, then reached for her own weapon, which was a spear. It was five feet in length from tip to butt. A foot-and-a-half long blade topped the business end, making it a suitable weapon for stabbing or slashing.

The smell of smoke grew heavier as shouts of alarm sounded. Outside, the camp that had once been lit by nothing but camp fires and moonlight was now lit up like an inferno. Even from where they stood, Xurek and Hrasa could see that the large smoking tent was set ablaze. As orcs hurried to put out the fire, Xurek and Hrasa could hear Golub’s harsh voice shouting and cursing above the turmoil. The two ran as fast as they could, making their way towards the tent where their winter stores were stowed. Some orcs had tried to run inside and save the meat, but came out empty-handed and covered in flames. Dozens of orcs rushed to dump buckets of water onto the flames, but to no avail. It only became worse when a stupid goblin mistook a flagon of liquor for water,

causing the flames to erupt and climb higher. “Bloody hell!” cursed Xurek. What had started the fire, no one knew. Turning to the left, Xurek saw one of the orcs carrying a bucket of water fall to the ground, an arrow protruding from his neck. Xurek then heard the unmistakable sound of a *thrum* followed by an all too familiar *hiss*! Several other orcs hit the ground, arrows penetrating their bodies. He motioned Hrasa to follow him as he came to one of the bodies and removed the arrow. By the perfectly smooth shaft, the finely polished steel, and the bright green fletching, the answer as to what started the fire was revealed. “Elf scum!” Xurek shouted in black speech. More arrows hissed through the air, felling orcs as they hit their mark. Orcs everywhere began to roar loudly and arm themselves. Soon enough, the enemy showed themselves. Out of the darkness came tall bright figures adorned in bronze-colored chainmail and dark leather armor, their long hair flowing out from underneath their hoods. They charged silently through the dark like phantoms, their longswords and spears poised and ready. Xurek and Hrasa roared in hatred along with their kin and charged headlong into a company of armed elves. “By the will of Sauron!” Hrasa shouted their traditional battle cry, her fellow warriors echoing her.

The mass of orcs and elves collided. Hrasa was the first to claim a kill. Her small frame made her a difficult target as she ducked underneath the swing of an elvish blade and sliced the elf she passed by, taking off one of his feet. That was the nature of Xurek’s little mate. For all her size, she was the most ferocious fighter in their midst. Before a single elf could come within range to use his weapon, Xurek unleashed three arrows. The first arrow hit its mark in an elvish eye socket, exiting the brain. The second

arrow took his second target under his left armpit. The third arrow planted itself in an elf's chest, punching through the chainmail. No sooner had he killed three than two more were upon him. The first elf reached him, sword upraised. Quickly, Xurek loosed an arrow which struck him in the throat. Before the elf had a chance to react to his wound, the half-orc threw up his leg, his armored shin connecting with the elf's face and sending him to the ground. The elf was clearly alive, for in the few seconds he lay there, he struggled to breathe, coughing and gurgling for a breath as blood filled his throat and mouth. He didn't have long to agonize, for Xurek ripped the arrow free. The arrowhead tore through the flesh, ripping out a chunk from the elf's throat. More blood gushed out of the wound like a spring until he expired. The second elf was nearly upon Xurek before he loosed the same arrow, taking him in the heart. Out of the corner of the half-orc's eye, another of the woodland creatures came at him from behind. Quickly, Xurek darted out of the way, the blade missing him by inches. He loosed the last arrow in his hand, the projectile entering underneath the elf's chin and passing cleanly through his head. Suddenly, Hrasa came running to stand beside him, "Down!" she shouted. Without protest, Xurek hit the ground and Hrasa snatched up her spear by the end of the shaft and swung it several times in a wide circling arc, the spear blade cutting into the throat of an elf to their right, and slashing the face of one in the center. She had missed their third assailant, so she threw her weapon, the long spear point stabbing into one side of his head and exiting the other. Hrasa wrenched her blade free, ripping the elf's head off as she did so before shaking it free of her weapon. "You need to pay more attention!" she shouted at Xurek. Before he could respond to her slight, he loosed two more arrows and

slew two more enemies who had nearly reached Hrasa before refilling his hand. This was one of numerous times they had saved each other's lives. Xurek cocked an eyebrow at her, mischievously, Hrasa scowling in return.

The battle continued, Xurek firing his arrows, never missing his mark, and Hrasa slicing and stabbing every opponent with relentless fury.

Xurek looked at his hand and saw he had one arrow left. He reached for more in his quiver, but found that they had all been spent. Carefully, he searched out his target. To his left, he spied Korgak, armed with a broad hand-and-half sword, hacking elves to pieces as they attacked him. He was doing well until one elf drove the tip of his spear into Korgak's waist, the point stopped only by the bone in his pelvis. A second and third elf came upon Korgak as he collapsed. Xurek knew that his half-brother would surely die now. *Good riddance*, came his first thought. Yet somehow, as much as he hated his half-brother, his conscience would not allow him to turn away. Nocking the arrow, Xurek drew back the string of his bow and released. As he had intended, the arrow entered into the back of the lead elf's head, where the spine met the skull, the arrow point exiting out of his mouth, his white teeth shattering and his tongue shredding. That was enough to catch the attention of the other two elves who had tackled Korgak. By the time they had directed their attention away from the big orc, Xurek was running towards them, his short-sword drawn. The elf to his right was armed with two sickle-shaped blades in each hand, while the other was armed with a curved longsword. They were both taller than he was, and without his bow to dispatch them, Xurek knew that this would be no easy task. With his only motivation being to save a bull-headed half-brother

who hated him, the task seemed all the more harrowing. Elves were superior to orcs in almost every way in combat. Every movement was fluid and precise, like water finding its way into the cracks in a rock, which made them hard to kill with a hand-held weapon. That is why Xurek preferred to take them with his bow. He did not have arrows, and there was no turning back now as he came closer.

The elf with the longsword lunged forward, taking a wide cut which would have cleaved the half-orc in two if not for Xurek's quick thinking. As the blade came forward, Xurek, in what seemed like a supernatural feat, leapt over the swing. As he passed the elf, the half-orc's sword bit deeply into his enemy's head, the blade entering between the brow ridge and the top of the nose and passing clean through, the bloody disk spinning through the air and flinging bits of flesh and bone until it landed on the ground next to the elf's body. *One down*, thought Xurek. He landed on his feet like a cat, but he had no time to breathe before the second elf was upon him. One of the sickle-like blades threatened to chop into his throat, but Xurek's short-sword met it first. It was then that the half-orc remembered that the elf had a weapon in each hand. The second sickle came in faster than the first, giving Xurek little time to react. He was able to dodge out of the way, but not before the tip of the blade sliced his shoulder. Xurek snarled at his enemy as black blood began to flow from his wound. Where he had been exhilarated before, his demeanor became darker and filled with a terrible wrath. Xurek spied a hatchet out of the corner of his eye lying on the ground next to him, and he hurriedly snatched it up and rushed back to the attack. Xurek felt his spirit surging, burning with an inner fire that refused to be quenched with anything save for blood. He attacked the elf with

unrelenting rage as he delivered blow after blow. The elf matched his every strike, but began to slow. He had cut Xurek several other times, but the half-orc seemed to immune to pain. He roared angrily as he pressed the elvish scum back until at last his short-sword sliced through his opponent's arm, cutting it off at the elbow. The elf screamed at seeing his limb severed from his body, but Xurek alleviated his suffering as he buried the hatchet deeply into his skull. More of the elvish attackers came at him, and for every one that came, Xurek's heart leaped with joy. He took at least five others that he could remember, cleaving through them with unparalleled ferocity. The last one he killed that night he had finished by cutting his legs out from under him, and then hacking him in the face before ripping a hunk out of the elf's throat with his fangs and swallowing. Elf flesh was one of the sweetest of meats.

As he stood on his feet, Xurek noticed that he and his orcish brethren had slain many. Ahead, he could see a few were still fighting, dying screams of both orc and elf echoing through the night air. Xurek did not remember when, but he realized that Hrasa was standing next to him, grasping her bloody spear at the ready. "You alright?" Hrasa asked looking up at her mate as Xurek wiped elvish blood from his forehead with the back of his hand. The half-orc didn't answer, but snorted loudly, blowing red blood out of his nostrils. He then pulled a black piece of cloth from the bottom of his quiver and began to wipe the blood from his blade. "Why do you always do that?" Hrasa asked with an annoyed smile. "Blood rusts a blade," he replied. "Bah!" the she-orc retorted. "Weapons thirst, and blood satiates them. Makes them strong!" Xurek did not correct her, but continued to clean his weapon. Among the carnage ahead of them, they could

see an unnaturally large wolf that drove its open jaw into the throat of a dying elf warrior. Moonpaw. Looking up, the warg licked sticky red liquid from his lips. Xurek waved a hand at his big canine friend who came bounding to him, leaping and treading over dead bodies of both orc and elf alike. “This was a good fight, young pup,” said Moonpaw and he sat on his haunches and scratched his ear vigorously. “Good? We got mounted and thrust from behind while we were sleeping, Moonpaw!” Xurek replied. Xurek, Hrasa, and Moonpaw surveyed the grim scene that was the battlefield. A handful of elves they had found alive and badly wounded they put to the sword. For their dying brethren, they gave them the gift of an easy passage into the next world.

The next morning, Xurek and the others assessed the damage of the night’s battle. Altogether, they had lost nearly twenty-five warriors, while around twelve were wounded, four of whom would never recover from their wounds. Nearly all of the elves had been slaughtered, but the few healthy ones who were minimally injured, or willingly surrendered, they took as prisoners, seventeen in all. As it turned out, they were Rivendell elves. They had been watching the clan for some time until they were given orders to strike from their elvish lord, one Elrond, to destroy their stockpile and let the winter have them. At first, the prisoners refused to talk, all that is but one who sang like a meadowlark when they held his toes over a bed of hot coals. They had also learned from their elvish captives that they had only been ordered to destroy the stores, and to not engage with the orcs. It was a mistake that they would later regret even more. What had been the clan’s greatest loss was not the loss of warriors, but the loss of their winter stores, and the elves knew it. Not one scrap of meat had been saved from the fire. All of

it had been incinerated. The reality of what this meant for the Black Blood Clan was grim. With their winter store destroyed, the clan would be facing starvation with few animals left in the woods to hunt, and even fewer farms left to raid. To begin restoring what was lost, Golub ordered that all of the dead that were not badly damaged, orc and elf alike, be butchered for meat. Not only this, but the elves who had been taken prisoner were also to be prepared for consumption.

Xurek walked about the camp and made his way to his quarters carrying a now refilled quiver bristling with thirty freshly fletched arrows. On the way, he passed several elves hanging from makeshift scaffolds by ropes tied tightly around their wrists. A small group of orcs surrounded them and began to cut fillets of flesh from their bodies as they writhed and screamed in horrifyingly high pitched voices as the knives separated their flesh from muscle and bone to be cooked for supper. As he passed, one orc was cutting a strip of flesh from an elf's calf, while another carved off a large piece from his chest. When they were finished, the orcs cauterized the flesh in order to keep the elves fresh until the next time. Xurek had already collected a haunch of flesh from an already dead elf which he spitted over a fire. There, he found Hrasa turning the meat to make sure it cooked evenly. Before he sat down, the half-orc stripped off his weapons and armor, and then removed his sleeveless rough-spun undershirt. When he sat, Hrasa began to clean his wounds as she always had. After what happened, he was unsure if he would ever set aside his sword again, so he kept it close by. His wounds were minor, but there were many more than he could remember receiving. There was a laceration on his shoulder, a gash across the right side of his forehead, a large blue bruise on his ribs, and

a cut above his left knee. When Hrasa patched Xurek's wounds, she was always quiet and reserved, her eyes rarely, if ever, blinking. It was like a sacred ritual for her. She washed the wounds with water, stitching with a bone needle and thread those that were deep. She allowed her fingers to linger in certain places such as his chest and the muscles in his shoulders. From her demeanor, Xurek felt as if she was looking at a god and admiring his divinity. She was nearly finished stitching the wound above his right eye when a roar made her jam the needle through his flesh, causing him to curse at the sudden pain. "Hold still!" she said as she pulled the last thread through and tied it, biting the thread off with her teeth. Turning their heads in the direction where they heard the roar, they both saw Korgak lying on the ground, about fifty yards from them, being held down by several orcs. The shattered tip of an elvish spear was being removed from the stab wound in the right side of his waist. Korgak had survived the battle after all, much to Xurek's disappointment. In actuality, he was hoping that Korgak would die of his wounds, but the instinct which drove him to save his half-brother had worked against him. He could see the angry glowing eyes of his half-brother staring back at him. He knew that he would receive no gratitude for his deed. No good deed went unpunished, especially in the Black Blood Clan. Luckily, for now, Korgak was too incapacitated to do anything rash until he healed. It soon became clear why his eyes were glowing, for another orc had arrived holding a red hot, glowing brand in his hand. If Korgak's cry from having the spear tip removed was terrifying, the sound he made when the brand was pressed into his wound was ear-splitting. The orc held it there for only a few seconds, the sound and smell of searing flesh mingling with the big orc's roars. When

the brand was finally removed, Korgak's pain gave way to rage. He leapt to his feet and snatched the brand away from the orc who had cauterized his wound and thwacked him over the head, sending him to the dirt. To drive home his point, Korgak drove the red hot brand into the face of the fallen orc. He could not stand for very long, for the pain in his side only worsened with his show of aggression, and he too collapsed before he was carried back to his tent. As he was carted away, he locked eyes with his younger half-brother, his angry glare threatening to bore a hole through his head. "I swear by all our ancestors, that one is going to be the death of us both someday. You have offended your brother greater than you could have imagined, my shadow," said Hrasa as she stared back at Korgak. "Offended? I saved his life!" exclaimed Xurek. "It does not matter! You know as well as I that aside from ruling the clan, the greatest honor for a warrior is to die in battle with the bodies of your enemies dead at your feet," she replied. "I've given him the chance to live and fight another day. To take up arms against our enemies. To win more glory than he would have before. Now he will kill me for it?" Xurek questioned, confused. "So, long as Golub holds him back, no," said Hrasa. He knew that what she was saying was true. He had known better than to interfere with his brother's own fight. Rather than save him and secure his place among the Black Blood Clan, he had embarrassed him, and robbed him of immortal glory. *Fool! I should have just let the shit stain die!* Xurek chided himself. "It would have been better for the both of you if you had not interfered," Hrasa said, affirming his thoughts. What did it gain him to save his half-brother? What great love did he possess for him that he would risk his life to save him? What had he hoped to gain? Respect? Honor? A change of heart from Korgak? The

more he thought about it, Xurek realized that even the alternative choice didn't end well. Golub kept the half-orc around for no other reason than he was useful. The half-orc's arrows had saved many lives in countless battles past. Golub might have killed him himself for neglecting to keep his beloved heir safe. In either case, he was damned if he did, and damned if he did not.

Hrasa removed the spitted elf meat from the fire and passed Xurek's piece to him. He looked up at the place where Korgak had been, stopping in mid-bite. There, he could see his father, Golub, staring back at him. His eyes were like his half-brother's in every way...and they burned with the same scorching anger.

Chapter 4

Five Years Ago

Xurek, at ten years old, reached combat age. Already, he was nearly tall as the average orc in the Black Blood Clan. Unfortunately, some orcs his age had not made it to maturity. Most were killed due to the brutal nature of their training, and others by their own playmates. Sagut, Korgak's companion, had been killed accidentally due to Xurek's stray arrow, and in turn, the half-orc had nearly been murdered by his elder half-brother. For every orc female who birthed five children, only one offspring was expected to reach adulthood, which is why many children were desired. There were few females among the Black Blood Clan, but the ones that resided within the group were expected to whelp as many orclings as possible. The weight of such a task taxed their bodies so much that most females died well before their prime. Few ever sought to join the males in raids. Hrasa was an exception. Her early interest in the art of war, her skill with a spear, and her ability to outclass males her own age made her a potentially powerful leader for the clan. Golub had been the first one to see this in her. He invested as much time to train her as he would one of his own brood. However, her relationship with the clan leader had been marred when she befriended Golub's bastard. She had seen Xurek's courage and his skill with a bow, which the clan leader and many others saw as a coward's weapon, but he was also skilled with a short sword. When none would train

him, Hrasa would spend significant amounts of her own time helping him to perfect his skill.

Early one morning, the war horn sounded a call to arms. It consisted of three sharp blasts. Xurek was awakened by Hrasa who shook him violently when he ignored the sound of the horn and rolled over. “Up, you slug!” she said. Xurek sat up angrily on his mat. How she got to his tent so quickly, he had not an inkling. “What!” he said sharply. It was still dark outside, early morning by the looks of it, and Hrasa was dressed in her armor and toting her spear. “Today! It’s today!” she said. He need not ask her a second time, for he knew what she meant. His yellow eyes widened with excitement when he realized the reason for her sudden intrusion. Hurriedly, he rushed out of bed and began to don his armor. Hrasa, not wanting to be late, helped Xurek to get it on by tying the strings on his leather corset while he put on his greaves and bracers. When he was finished, she strapped on his belt which held his quiver full of bristling arrows. Then, he slung on his short-sword baldric. Waiting not another moment, he and Hrasa ran as fast as they could towards the sound of the war horn, its blasts still echoing in the distance. Today was the day they had been awaiting for a long time, a day known as the blooding. When young orcs reached combat age, they were called to test their skills at an unspecified time.

Torches lit the gathering place where a group of thirty or more young orcs waited, armed and ready. In front of them were three adult orcs. The one to the left was Golub, and the other to the right was one of his captains. In the center stood an old orc with wrinkled black skin, covered in scars. One of the scars stretched from the top of his

head all the way down his mouth to the bottom of his chin. His lips on the right side of his face were covered in healed splits, and many of his teeth were missing. He leaned on a large poleaxe as if it were a walking staff, a wicked looking weapon. The old orc was Acbosh. He was the eldest member of the Black Blood Clan, and for all his age, the bulging muscles in his arms suggested that he was still as dangerous as he was in his prime. He was honored for his wisdom, and thought of as an elder of sorts, but where he excelled was in training orcs for combat. Whatever the foe, be it elf, dwarf, human, or goblinkind, Acbosh knew how to kill it.

Xurek saw many of his training partners standing with him, all of them bearing signs of healed injuries on their bodies. Scanning the crowd, Xurek turned his head to the left, and his eyes spied a young orc with only a small nub of flesh where his right ear had been. Korgak. The half-orc turned his face away, so as to not make contact. The young orcs chattered loudly, their weapons ready in their hands, eager to make their first kill, but they were silenced when Acbosh raised his hand and shouted, “Shut up, whelps!” Every eye of the youth rested on the old orc as he began his speech. “You have survived your training. The life of an orc is not one which is comfortable. It is pitiless, merciless, and unforgiving, like the heart of an orc itself!” The old one scanned the crowd of onlookers, and then began to pace back and forth. “This day, you will be blooded. Everything you have learned will be put to the test on the field of battle. Some you will come away victorious with the taste of blood fresh on the tip of your tongue. The rest of you will not see another day,” Acbosh said before stopping his pacing. “We are orcs, servants of darkness. How do we stand and fall?” In response, the young orcs

shouted unanimously, “By the will of Sauron!” It was the phrase that was drilled into their heads every single day when training. Orcs were not free by any means, as all they were and would be was subject to the will of their dark lord. “Aye! By the will of Sauron. It was his master Morgoth who formed us, and it is Sauron now who makes our weapons thirst for blood. It is his essence which drives us to kill. It is his power that forces us to charge, rather than retreat. And it is by his will that we win or die!” Golub then stepped forward and spoke: “This morning, a group of our scouts uncovered a group of humans close to our camp. You will go, find them, and kill them. As proof of your blooding, you will return with the head of one of your foes in hand.” The other orc, one of Golub’s captains, then said, “Well, what are you waiting for, ya scum? Get after them!” With that, the young orcs howled with glee and ran towards the exit of their camp.

Navigating through the cracks in the canyon, the group of young orcs made their way out of their camp and into the open plains. There were very few trees, so finding cover would not be easy. It was an overcast day. No blazing sun would hamper them, and it looked as if it would rain soon. Once outside, the group stopped, and assessed their next move. Naturally, Korgak, the biggest in the group, took the role of leader, and no one dared dispute his claim. Where the humans were, they did not know. Part of their blooding was to hunt them down. “What are you standing around for, pick up the trail!” bellowed Korgak brandishing his broadsword. A short, gangly goblin piped up, sniffing loudly, “I smell them. They are close, very close!” “You dumb shit!” Korgak growled. “That’s not the humans. That’s the bastard standing behind you.” All eyes locked on

Xurek who felt like a rabbit being eyed by two-dozen hungry wolves. “What’s he doin’ here?” another orc piped up. Cries of half-breed, mongrel, and bastard emerged from the babbles. Xurek dared not show his anger, but stood straight and tall. “We don’t want you here, bastard! Get gone!” Korgak said, stepping forward. “Xurek is going nowhere!” Hrasa objected, her spear at the ready as she stepped in front of him. “You don’t belong here neither, she-orc!” Korgak said gruffly. “Maybe you should go with him.” “You need us, Korgak. You know that Xurek is the best tracker in the group, and I’m a better fighter than anyone here...Even you!” Hrasa’s last remark made Korgak lunge forward as if he were going to throttle her, but he found himself pressed against the tip of her spear. How it had gotten there, he couldn’t remember. Halting his advance, he stood back, towering over Hrasa and Xurek: “You find them humans, and we’ll see.” Xurek, without a word stepped forward and began sniff the air. Hrasa stood to his rear, fearful that one of their kin would do something stupid. After several short sniffs, Xurek took one long snort, licking the air with his tongue as if he were reptile. He then dropped to the ground and began to crawl. He moved forward, staring at the ground as if he were a hound, his defined nose rubbing into the earth. Suddenly, he stopped. “What? What did you find?” asked Hrasa excitedly. Looking over his shoulder, the she-orc noticed that Xurek had found an impression in the earth. The grass had been flattened, and the dirt underneath exposed. Several feet ahead, Xurek noticed more prints on the ground. “Made this morning,” came Xurek’s reply. “They are not far.” “This way!” shouted Hrasa pointing ahead with her spear. With that, Korgak ordered them to march.

Xurek and Hrasa led the group, moving at a fast pace. Their march was halted when the half-orc threw up his fist. “Well, what’s the matter?” Korgak said, much too loudly. “Shut it!” Xurek said in a quiet, yet harsh tone. “Why you...,” Korgak started to say before Hrasa said, “Quiet! They are very close.” She then motioned with her hand for all to lower themselves to the ground. Ahead there was tall grass, a good cover which they crawled through until what they had sought came into view. Ahead, they could see a large group of humans. There were nearly fifty in all, at least half of them presenting a threat. The best Xurek could tell, these were no ordinary villagers based on their dress and the weapons they carried. If he were to guess, they were a gang of bandits or marauders, like themselves. Luckily, none of them had horses. Ordinary peasants with farm tools would have been easy pickings, but lightly armored foes with actual weapons would be a challenge. Having never been in actual combat before, the young orcs would be going up against experienced fighters. They had all seen human bodies and eaten their flesh when the warriors returned home from a raid, but few had they seen alive. “Ready your weapons. It’s time to strike!” said Korgak too eagerly. “No,” said Xurek. “We need to wait until dark when they’re asleep. They will be taken much more easily.” “Bah! I’ve not time for that. We’re here to kill, not to sit here with our fingers up our arses!” Korgak replied. Hrasa had no idea why Xurek would want to wait when the prospect of being blooded was so closely within reach, but nevertheless, she heeded her friend’s advice. “We should wait, Korgak.” “Hell with that! By the will of Sauron!” Korgak shouted before charging forward with the rest of the group. “Damn you!” shouted Xurek angrily, but Korgak could not hear him. Already, the humans had sounded cries of

alarm. Women and their children screamed, as the men shouted calls to arms. Ahead, orcs charged towards a group of human males. Korgak was the first to make a kill, his two-handed broadsword nearly cutting his opponent in half, but the humans fought back just as hard. Several orcs had already fallen as the battle ensued. What Korgak and the others had expected to be a slaughter in their favor was becoming an even match. Ever a faithful friend, Hrasa never left Xurek's side. Hurriedly, the half-orc seized multiple arrows with his bow hand and began to take aim. Lucky for him, these humans were not heavily armored foes, which made his task easier. Hrasa defended him from any who sought his life, using her spear to deadly effect.

To their surprise, many of the women in the group took up arms and began to fight side by side with the men, but like them, they fell just as easily beneath orcish steel. During the battle, one of the humans made it past Hrasa's defense. Xurek quickly moved to fire his arrow at his oncoming attacker, but he missed by mere inches. Cursing, he drew out his short-sword and blocked an oncoming attack from a heavy double-bit axe, deflecting it before running the blackened steel through his foe's stomach, ripping it free, and moving onto the next opponent.

Steadily, the battle swayed further towards the favor of the orcs until the humans began to flee as their numbers decreased. The orcs gave chase as the cowardly men left behind fellow fighters, even their women bearing young in their arms. They showed them no mercy as they fled. Xurek let fly his arrows at those humans furthest ahead, allowing none to escape. The few humans that still had a shred of courage left turned and fought, only to die as orcish warriors fell upon them. After Xurek had spent his last

arrow, he resorted to using his short-sword. One human male turned and came at him, longsword upraised. Xurek, not thinking quickly enough, received a nasty cut on his thigh, black blood spilling out. At first, the wound made him feel panicky and afraid, but then the pain began to subside. His attention turned to the one who had inflicted it, for now the human had become the object of Xurek's wrath. He didn't remember how, or why, but the half-orc soon found himself short of breath and looming over the body of the human who had wounded him, shredded beyond recognition. Yet even in his apparent fatigue, he felt an amazing sense of satisfaction. *Did I do this?* was Xurek's first thought. Even though his memory was vague as to what had happened, the red blood that covered him and painted the blade of his weapon only confirmed his suspicion. Letting his weapon hand go limp, and his body slack, the half-orc turned his head to the direction of where the rest of his fellow orcs pursued the fleeing humans. When he did, he found himself staring down the pointed end of a sword, and at the other end was another human male. By the looks of him, he looked to be nearly as tall as a full grown man, but his face lacked the stubble and wear of an adult. Judging by orcish standards, the half-orc found the human to be no older than himself. Xurek's body tensed as he instantly assumed his fighting position again, his anger pulsating as he sensed his next kill coming soon. Easily, he knocked the blade aside and rested the tip of his sword underneath the chin of the young male. The boy was still gripping the sword in his right hand, but he dropped it when he felt the bloody steel touch his skin. Now, he was at the half-orc's mercy. Satisfied at his easy victory, Xurek raised his sword and readied to strike, but then stopped. The stroke that would have ended the boy's life was

cut short as something caught the half-orc's eye. As the human stared back at him, Xurek could see himself reflected in the eyes of his would-be victim. Never before had Xurek seen himself. All his life, Xurek knew that he was different, but now he was able to see exactly what the others saw. He could see that his skin was not completely black like tar, but greyish with a yellow hue. His had a pointed brow that made him look like a wolf in that regard. He also saw that his lower jaw was much too large, his mouth partially open so that his canine fangs in his bottom jaw jutted out. His nose was not flat, but defined like that of a...human. Xurek's gaze fell away from the boy's eyes and onto the boy himself. As he stared, his weapon lowered to his side. Even now, the young human seemed unafraid of his attacker, and stared back at him with a strange curiosity. Now that Xurek saw his appearance, much of what had been a mystery to him made sense. Compared to his kin, he didn't look much like them at all. He had been called a half-orc his entire life, but not until now had he comprehended the weight of what that meant. This human standing before him was also his kin. The two stared at each other not as enemies, but as if they were long lost relatives having met at last. The moment of revelation did not last long, however. For only a few moments after, an all too familiar sound deadened the silence. *Schlick!* Xurek's stare never broke from the boy's eyes, even as his head left his shoulders, crimson liquid spraying through the air as it fell. As the head tumbled to the ground, the body fell next to it. The strange attraction he had felt to the young human male was altogether lost. Standing over the beheaded body was his elder half-brother Korgak, his bloody broadsword clenched in his fist. He stared at Xurek as if he had a third eye in the middle of his forehead. Without so much as a word,

the big orc reached down and snatched the head of the boy by the hair, fixed it to a small iron hook, and tied the bloody trophy to his belt before skulking off to the others.

Xurek stood in shock as he stared at the body of the dead human, its crimson life fluid spilling into the soil for the earth to drink. Standing there, he seemed a statue whose gaze was forever fixed and unwavering. “Xurek,” he heard in the background, but paid it no mind. “Xurek!” It came louder this time, followed by a hand on his shoulder which shook him violently. He turned his head to see that Hrasa had demanded his attention, her shrill voice coming to his ear with sudden recognition. “Yer bleeding out!” she said. Looking down, the half-orc could see that his right thigh had a gaping wound which bled down his leg. The recognition of his wound immediately made him realize the pain, but he steeled himself to show little discomfort. Thinking quickly, he squatted down in the soil and began to take up handfuls of dirt, packing the wound. He ground his teeth as the soil stung. It was not the best solution, but for now it sufficed. “You need to pay more attention! You could have died,” Hrasa continued to chide him. Taking up his sword, Xurek wiped the blood away before putting it back in its scabbard. He could see that Hrasa had the head of one of the humans she had slain mounted on the point of her spear. “You were right,” she said to him as he picked up his bow, pulled one of his arrows from a dead human, and put it back into his quiver. “Right about what?” he asked. “Korgak was wrong. These were not mere farmers, these were experienced fighters. We should have waited!” she responded. Looking at the aftermath of the battle, he could see that he was indeed right as Hrasa had said. Of the dead, at least half were their orcish brethren. There was nothing he or Hrasa could do now. Korgak’s

stubbornness was to blame this day, but knowing Golub's favored son, there would be nothing done to him.

An hour later, the surviving orcs began to collect their heads as proof of their blooding, and likewise give the gift of easy passage to their dying brethren and enemies. Xurek had managed to find nearly all of his arrows; all the while, Hrasa watched him like a mother hawk, anxious that he might stumble from his wounded leg. She once tried to help him when he stumbled, but he shrugged her off, not wanting to be seen as weak. After he snatched up his last arrow and set it in his quiver, Hrasa said to him, "Don't forget your head." At first, he thought she was making a jest, but then realized that she was speaking of the literal head he was supposed to bring back with him. Xurek seemed annoyed at the prospect, bringing such a grim trophy back with him as proof that he was an orc. Reluctantly, Xurek unsheathed his short sword and decapitated the human he had pulled his last arrow from with one clean strike, and snatched his trophy up by the hair. "Let's go," he said dryly.

When they had returned to camp, Xurek, Hrasa, and the others were greeted by a host of the older orcs who made great cheer at their arrival. They had wild game butchered and roasting on a spit, and the smell of fresh meat permeated the canyon. Korgak and his companions immediately began to enjoy the feast upon presenting the heads they had taken. Alas, Xurek was not one for such festivities. Where Korgak was met with praise for the trophy he presented, Xurek and Hrasa were given a less than enthusiastic nod of approval and told to go. Some of the orcs had given their trophy heads over to their goblin butchers who began to clean them, removing the flesh so that

the skulls might be polished and mounted. Others dumped their trophies into a cauldron of boiling water so that they might eat them. After their trophy heads were inspected by Acbosh, Xurek tossed his trophy into a cauldron with the others. Hrasa was shocked. “Why’d you do that?” she asked aggressively, seeing him waste a good trophy. “What would I want it for?” Xurek answered. “It is your trophy. Your first kill!” “Bah! I don’t know that it is my first kill. I emptied my quiver, who knows which one was my first kill?” he replied a second time.

Retreating to their tent, Xurek and Hrasa spitted a haunch of meat that the butchers had given him for his generous offer of the head. At the camp, Hrasa had commenced with cleaning his wound. The dirt that Xurek had packed it with had become soaked with blood, which made it difficult to remove. He swore incessantly when she unintentionally scraped him too hard. Hrasa was able to clear the wound of most of the dirt, after which she took a skin of water and poured it into the exposed flesh. Another curse escaped from Xurek’s tongue as the cold fluid trickled through the canyon of flesh in his thigh, washing out the excess dirt and dried blood. “We will need to cauterize the wound,” said Hrasa pulling a stick with a glowing red end out of the fire. Xurek hurriedly slapped the would-be brand out of her hand. “Bugger that!” he said angrily, horrified at the thought of cooking flesh. “Pour some strong drink on it,” he said. “Strong drink? What will that do?” Hrasa questioned. “You ever see what happens when you put a worm in liquor? It dies. I reckon any sickness living in my flesh will be destroyed all the same,” said Xurek. By the look on her face, she was clearly confused as to what exactly her friend was getting at, but nonetheless was compliant. She retrieved a

small skin of strong liquor from his tent, and then proceeded to pour it into the wound. It was then that Xurek began to regret his decision to have strong drink poured into his wound rather than have it cleansed and sealed with a burning brand. The severe sting of the liquor surged through his flesh, and was so painful that he began to grind his teeth and pound at the ground. Even when the pain subsided, it was no relief. Hrasa proceeded to stitch the wound closed with a bone needle in order to hold the flesh together. It was a long, slow process. The first few stitches felt even worse than the wound itself. He had Hrasa stop at one point so that he could tie a makeshift tourniquet on his leg. After a good while, his leg was numb enough that he allowed her to finishing her stitching with relatively little pain. He felt better once she was finished, and by then the meat had finished cooking to both their likings.

While they ate, neither spoke. They washed down their meat with a shared skin of wine; the thick, hot, red drink burning as it snaked down their throats and into their gullets. As Xurek swallowed a mouthful of wine, he looked up to see the Hrasa's spear, its butt spike planted in the ground with the human head she had taken mounted to the business end, its lifeless eyes staring at them while they finished their meal. It was just like Hrasa not do things in the traditional fashion. Rather than dump the head in a boiling cauldron as Xurek had done, or hand it over to the butchers to clean it for her, she would let it rot naturally, enjoying the satisfaction of her entrance into the way of the orcish warrior. Xurek took another swig of wine for good measure. Looking out into the glowing fires around the camp, he could see that the other triumphant orcs celebrated their victory with the encouragement of their elders. Again, he was the one who was

excluded. Even as capable a killer as he had proven himself to be, he was still a half-orc. That's when his thoughts went back to the boy in whose eye he had seen himself for the first time, but he dared not dwell on it. Some thoughts were too terrible to contemplate.

The young half-orc stood to his feet and gave a long stretch followed by a yawn which exposed his oversized, tusk-like fangs, "I'm getting in the sack," he said to Hrasa as he entered his hut. Inside, he closed the flaps to his hut and pulled back the covers of his mat before crawling inside. Fatigued as he was, he was nearly fast asleep until he heard the flaps of his hut open once again. He sat up and snatched up his sword, expecting the worst, but his sword arm soon relaxed when he saw who it was. Hrasa crawled inside his hut, her gaze focused on him, her eyes never breaking from his own. Like before, Xurek said nothing, but his face asked everything. Hrasa gladly answered him, her face bearing a look he had never seen before. The she-orc's hands fumbled at her clothing. "You have not yet claimed your other prize." Her clothes suddenly fell to the floor. There she stood, naked in the dark of Xurek's hut. For the first time in his life, Xurek experienced a new sensation which he had not experienced before. Without her armor, weapons, and clothing, Hrasa no longer looked like his childhood companion. Now, she looked beautiful. He could see her small, firm breasts with tar black nipples that made them nearly invisible in relation to her skin, and he could also see her naked hips, legs, and..."Hrasa," was all that rolled off his tongue. She came at him quickly, and they tumbled to the floor. She helped him rip his clothes free, until he was as bare as she was. As if by instinct, Xurek threw her to the floor, as rough as she was, and with his male parts, he went into her. The rush of invigoration he knew when making his first

kills in battle was now surpassed by the pleasure he felt as he and Hrasa merged flesh there in the dark. Where they had been close before, henceforth, they were forever inseparable. They were friends...mates...each other's shadows.

Chapter 5

Since the day of the elf attack, the orcs of the Black Blood Clan had nearly depleted their resources. With their winter store destroyed, they had resorted to eating the dead left over from the battle, elf and orc alike, as well as their elvish prisoners. Though many had fallen, the number of mouths to feed soon made quick work of the meat. With their situation dire, Golub had sent out four groups of scouts mounted on wargs to the north, south, east, and west in order to find if there were any places left to raid. Three of the groups had returned with no news. The scouts sent to the west had not yet returned, and had been gone two weeks longer than the rest. The prospect was dire. In desperation, many of the orcs had set out into the woods to hunt what animals might be nearby. Few, if any were to be found, and when some returned with a kill, they had to fight off a crowd of angry orcs who all wanted a share. A group of orcs who had returned from a hunt with a deer and several rabbits in hand were met with such savagery. At the end of it, not only had the mob claimed the rabbits and the deer, but they had added the orcs who had taken the game to their meal. Golub had been especially angry at that incident, for he had the instigators flayed and butchered for dinner, five in all. He normally wouldn't have minded such brash behavior, but with supplies and morale both low, the last thing that he needed was discord among the clan.

Xurek and Hrasa sat inside their tent chewing on bits of dried meat. They had saved portions from their previous meals, which consisted mainly of elf and orc, and dried them for future rations. Dried meat required no cooking, which would not attract

any unwanted attention. They supplemented their meager meal of dried rations with handfuls of worms, insects, birds, rabbits, and squirrels that they had taken from the nearby forest, and from within the canyon itself. Animals like these were small enough that they could be hidden and smuggled. To further hide their fresh kills, they ate all of their game raw.

Xurek chewed on the bone of a raw rabbit, his teeth crunching through it to expose the sweet marrow. Across from him, Hrasa swallowed a mouthful of bloody, red flesh, staining her face. As they finished their food, a horn sounded off in the distance causing the Xurek to stop mid-chew. It was a horn from one of the sentries. Xurek looked to Hrasa who stared at him with a knowing gaze. Wasting no time, they left what remained of their meat and hurried out of the tent, weapons in hand. Orcs from around the canyon began to head toward the sound of the horn.

Through the front entrance of the canyon came four goblins mounted on wargs. It did not take long for Golub to arrive, for Xurek could see his massive frame shoving his way through the crowd of curious orcs. All were unnaturally silent, bent on hearing what the scouts had to say. Golub's voice was heard clearly, "What is it? What have you found?" The mounted goblin closest to the front spoke up in a shrill, raspy voice: "To the west! There is food enough to feed us for a winter, and the coming spring! A large village full of it!" "What of the inhabitants? What are their defenses? Are they armed? Speak!" Golub asked anxiously. "No...they ain't armed at all..." The goblin's reply was one that left Golub perplexed, but he said nothing, hoping to hear more. "They is all short people," said the mounted goblin. "Dwarves?" Golub questioned. "No! These is

shorter. They's beardless, and has furry feet. There's not even a wall 'round their village! I've never seen their like, and their scent's nothing I've smelled before," the goblin replied, licking his fangs. "How far?" Golub now asked nervously. "A fortnight if we go at a steady pace. We would be met with no resistance. The place is a fruit ripe for the picking!" the goblin replied excitedly. "Good work!" Golub said as he turned and boomed out in loud voice so that all could hear. "Alright, you scum. We are not going to freeze to death this winter. Nor are we to starve. Get adequate rest, for tomorrow we march!" The crowd of on-looking orcs replied in unison with a cry of affirmation. "We will take this place, and we will slaughter all in sight. And when we finish with their food, we will then add their flesh to our supplies. No mercy! No holding back!" The orcs again replied with cries of affirmation, weapons held high in the sky. All were excited, whipping themselves into a frenzy; that is, all but Xurek. The prospect of killing unarmed...whatever they were...did not sit well with him. The half-orc had a hard enough time with killing unarmed humans. To the left, even Hrasa raised her spear high into the air and roared loudly along with the rest of her kin. Her eyes caught her lover staring at her, and she paused. Her wicked smile faded, and her arms began to drop. Xurek's face fell, a look of utter disappointment on his face. Without so much as a word, Xurek turned and walked away from the crowd. As he scuttled back to his tent, he felt the familiar feeling of a pair of eyes resting on him. Hoping it to be Hrasa, he turned his head only to lock eyes with Korgak. He stood stoically, ignoring the roaring crowd, his arms motionless by his side. The half-orc could tell that he was completely healed from the wound he had sustained from their last battle. He need not ask to know what his

elder half-brother was thinking. The words Hrasa had said to him began to echo in his head. *Fool! Fool! Fool!* he thought while breaking his stare and walking away.

Later that evening, when the sun began to set, Hrasa finally made her way back to their tent. She had taken her time in returning. Xurek believed that it was because she felt he needed to cool down before she returned. No need of prodding at a frying pan while it was still hot. Xurek sat cross-legged as he normally did around the fire, his armor still on, and his sword, bow, and quiver within arm's reach. He was putting an edge on his knife. He stopped only for a moment to glance at Hrasa before continuing to scrape his blade across the whetstone. She set her spear aside before sitting next to the half-orc. "What are you doing?" she asked rather stupidly. "Making sure my weapons are ready. In a fortnight we will be fighting unarmed peasants, and we must be ready unless they take us by surprise," he said sarcastically as he dealt a long grinding drag to the knife's blade. Hrasa sighed, rubbing the palm of her hand on her forehead. Xurek continued to scrape the blade, ignoring her. "We have to eat, Xurek. We are raiders. This is our life!" she said. "Sometimes this life is wearing. You and the others think we are warriors for killing enemies who offer no contest! Bah!" he retorted. "You have done it before. Why does it irk you so now?" Hrasa asked. Xurek stopped sharpening his blade and put it back in its sheath. "Hrasa, think about it. What honor is there in killing unarmed opponents? Where is the true test of skill?" Xurek asked. The she-orc snorted loudly, "Would you rather fight opponents that are armed and ready? Would you rather fight those who present a problem for us when we are faced with starvation?" "Yes!" came Xurek's angry reply. Hrasa was taken aback by his remark. Rather than question

him further, she silenced herself and continued to listen. “When we were attacked by the elves, when we fought an enemy that fought us back, it felt invigorating...I felt alive, Hrasa! We counted losses, yes, and we walked away wounded, but we won because of our superior strength. And we proved it against an enemy who challenged our claim! What happened to the glory days when our kind fought the dwarves in the Iron Hills, the elves in Lothlorien, or the Rohirrim in Rohan? You claim to be a warrior, yet you revel in the slaughter of unarmed swine like these others. Piss on that, and piss on you!” When Xurek finished, he stared into Hrasa’s face, his own stern and angry. He had never seen her face like this before, but as he looked at her, he swore he saw the faintest glint of sadness in her eyes. The half-orc’s lucid anger began to subside as he stared at her. Never before had he seen Hrasa this way. For the first time in his life, he had wounded her. They had sparred an untold number of times, coming away with cuts, scrapes, and bruises; but neither of them felt any ill feelings, and neither were they ever angry with one another. Xurek sighed loudly, dipping his head in shame, knowing he had gone too far. Raising his head up again, he motioned for the she-orc to come to him. She inched forward, slowly, and sat beside Xurek, her small frame resting under his left arm. “What are we to do, my shadow?” she asked. “I don’t know...,” he replied staring into the fire. “The clan has grown too large. For a force such as this, much is required to keep it going. It is only a matter of time before it falls into disarray. When supplies run low, the leadership will lose control.” Silence crept over their campsite. The thought of the clan falling into disarray was a thought that was almost too frightening to entertain.

They both stared into the fire as if they were attempting to divine the future, trying to make out a pattern in the glowing embers and flickering flames, desperate for an answer. It was then that Xurek remembered his dream, or rather, his nightmare, in which he and Hrasa had abandoned the clan and struck out on their own. Aside from the ghastly ending of the dream, the idea of starting a new life felt right. “Why don’t we leave?” Xurek asked. “Leave?” Hrasa answered, her voice laden with confusion. “We take what we need, and we run. We start a new life.” The she-orc scoffed, “If they catch us, they will kill us! And Golub will not make it a swift death.” “If,” Xurek retorted. Hrasa sighed in frustration, “How do you s’pose we do that? We march out tomorrow. Stealing away will not be easy when we’re in an open field. Tracking us would be easy.” Xurek knew that she was right. Once the clan began to move, getting away would be extremely difficult. “We leave tonight then,” said Xurek. Hrasa said nothing, but only stared at him with a questioning gaze. “We tell the sentries we’re going hunting.” “And where shall we go?” asked his lover, “Do we join with others?” “Hrasa, I’ve had enough of killing for a while. Why not settle down?” Xurek answered. Now she laughed as if he were making a jest, but the half-orc’s demeanor remained stern and she stopped. “Oh Xurek, we are not farmers! Orcs who don’t fight are no orcs at all. It is what we are. We are born to kill. It is the will of Sauron which drives us forward. We serve him, and he commands us. We cannot outrun our fate. It is fixed, and cannot move.” “It does not have to be that way, Hrasa!” Xurek said sharply. “Bugger Sauron and his will!” “You are mad, Xurek,” the she-orc said. Xurek wanted to hit her square in the face. Her

stupidity was usually tolerable, but now it was beginning to wear thin. He restrained himself, however, and spat to his right just when he thought their argument would end.

“Going somewhere, little brother?” said a voice from out of the darkness.

Turning his head, he saw the tall dark figure of Korgak. It was the first time he had ever called Xurek “brother” before, and it was something that he was not going to let him get away with. “Half-brother. And damn you,” said Xurek. “Going to run like a coward and take your bitch with you? Disobey the direct order of your chieftain?” Korgak continued. Hrasa began to snarl at his remark, but Xurek silenced her with his hand, attempting to diffuse the situation. The last thing he wanted was bring down the wrath of his elder half-brother, and a group of orcs that had suddenly taken an interest in what was happening. Xurek and Hrasa could already see glowing eyes peep out of the twilight and move closer to them. Korgak’s booming voice was loud enough to carry across the entire canyon. “What do you care?” answered the half-orc standing to his feet, “You don’t want us here anyway. You’ve wished I would die since the day Golub brought me here.” Korgak laughed loudly, bearing his yellow fangs as he did so. “Oh, bastard, you know I would love nothing more than to see you go...but unfortunately, you will not be leaving in the way you want. You owe me a debt, and I’m here to collect. You soiled my standing with the clan, and now you are going to pay for it!” The on-looking orcs laughed along with him, excited to see what was coming next. “You half-wit! I saved your worthless arse. You’d be dead if not for me! When Golub hears of this...,” Xurek’s tongue turned to lead inside his mouth, for over the shoulder of Korgak, his eyes spied Golub who stood there grinning only too approvingly at the scene that was unfolding

before him. Xurek glanced at Hrasa who wore a look of terror on her face. The words she had spoken to him, “So long as Golub holds him back...,” began to echo in his head. The one thing that held back Korgak, aside from his injuries, was his sire. This all had been arranged by Golub, and now he had made good on his promise to give to Xurek to his favorite son if he erred again.

Suddenly, the big orc lunged forward and struck Xurek on the brow, knocking him backward. Hrasa growled angrily and looked as if she were about to enter the fight. “Stay out of this, Hrasa!” shouted Xurek. Before he could say anything else, the lanky half-orc was hoisted into the air by the massive black arms of Korgak and tossed like a fetid fruit. Xurek collided with the ground, tasting dirt. Quickly, he leapt to his feet and readied for his half-brother’s next attack. By comparison, Korgak’s stature towered over Xurek’s, and his bulk was far greater. Xurek was shorter and lanky, which made him weaker, but he was also quicker, which gave him an advantage. Korgak came at him with balled fists, swinging right and left. Xurek’s thin frame and speed made him nearly untouchable. So far, the fight was reminding him of the last one which ended with him biting off Korgak’s ear. A few times, Xurek had hit him square in the face, but it was as if he were punching a mountain made of flesh. After dodging a fist aimed at his face, Xurek delivered a kick to the side of Korgak’s head, the steel greave on his shin tearing a gash on the top of his left eyebrow. Before the half-orc could pull away, he felt a vice grip the heel of his left foot and fling him onto his back. Numerous kicks connected with the half-orc’s ribs. The big orc then picked him up and began to pummel him repeatedly. Before Xurek blacked out, he heard the shrill voice of Hrasa cry out with an angry roar.

Where Xurek had been dwarfed by his half-brother, Hrasa had might as well had been an ant when standing next to him, but she attacked him none-the-less. With his back turned, she kicked him hard between the legs, cracking the big orc's groin with a *crunch*, causing him to drop his prey. Korgak fell to the ground, doubling over. "You stupid oaf!" she cried. The she-orc then turned to help Xurek get to his feet. Hrasa only managed to drag him several feet before Korgak, pushing through his pain, turned to the attack. Hrasa was met with a heavy hand that snatched her by her shoulder and lifted her into the air. She soon found herself face-to-face with Korgak. "Someone should have taught you some respect, you half-breed's whore!" Angry, Hrasa flung her open palm forward. Korgak, thinking she was going to slap him, did not move, but he soon regretted that mistake; the she-orc had raked him across his face with her sharp claws, digging black trenches into his flesh. The big orc roared in agony, but his grip never loosened from his prey. He wiped the blood from his face with his free hand, smearing it, and then turned his face towards Hrasa and growled angrily. What happened next made the orcs burst into a frenzy of wicked encouragement. Korgak threw Hrasa to the ground and struck her twice with his open hand until she was dazed. He then turned her backside towards him, pulled down the clothing that covered his male parts and mounted her, thrusting violently. Hrasa, weakened as she was, managed to dig her claws into the big orc's flesh, which he responded to by hitting her again and again. Hrasa growled in protest, struggling with what vigor she had left in her to fight back, but the massive hands of Korgak held her in place, not allowing her to move as he took his pleasure. The whole while, Xurek lay unconscious on the ground, unaware as to what was taking

place. In a scream of desperation, the she-orc cried out, “Xurek!” She continued to call as Korgak continued his brutish task. Many of the orcs watching the vulgar spectacle began to jeer and mock her, calling Xurek’s name.

As if by some strange magic, Xurek groaned loudly and rolled over to his side. He blinked several times, bringing his vision back to his eyes. When his black world became clear once again, the sight that lay before him made his heart sink. His eyes locked with Hrasa’s, her gaze full of hopelessness which begged him to make it stop. Xurek felt his lips curl back in anger as the only orc he cared about in Middle Earth was being defiled by the one he hated most, but like many times before, his weaker emotions soon gave way to rage. Angered, he scrambled to his feet and pulled his sword from its scabbard, the blade hissing like an angry serpent as it exited. “STOP!” he shouted, his voice full of hatred. The crowd fell silent immediately, and Korgak ceased his vile pleasure as he stood to his feet, jerking Hrasa up with him. “Well...,” said Korgak with a satisfied smile, “...you have some balls after all.” Without warning, Korgak drew out his knife and plunged it into the back of Hrasa, the blade piercing out her chest. The she-orc gasped in dread surprise as pain shot through her spine into her ribs. The big orc then yanked the blade free, and Hrasa slumped to the ground. Xurek’s rage became greater as years of buried hatred welled up in his heart. He roared out an ear-splitting cry and ran to meet his half-brother. Korgak drew out his long two-handed broadsword as Xurek leapt into the air and brought down his short blade onto it, the big orc blocking it at the last possible moment. Xurek dashed away as his half-brother parried his strike and brought his own blade down with a heavy two-handed swipe which struck the earth where the

half-orc had been standing. Crouching like an angry cat ready to pounce, Xurek barred his fangs, his blade poised in front of him. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this day, bastard. Now, I’m gonna wear your guts like a garment!” said Korgak. The big orc charged, his heavy blade making a wide arching swipe, but the half-orc, being slender of frame and nimble, dodged out of the way. As he did so, his short sword bit into the flesh at the small of Korgak’s back. His armor kept the blade from going too deeply, but it left a nasty wound which leaked black blood. Korgak snarled, grinding his fangs as his raw flesh was exposed. “Then do it, if you can,” Xurek said, his breath as cold as ice. Xurek attacked next, making a wide cut with his short sword, Korgak moved backward to avoid being slashed, then moved forward to deliver a killing stroke. He had fallen for the half-orc’s ruse. Xurek sidestepped the attack, getting inside the range of his half-brother’s weapon, but Xurek’s blade was short, making it perfect for stabbing at close distances. The half-orc reared his sword arm backward for the final death strike, but his stab felt short as his half-brother moved just enough for the weapon to pass safely under his arm. He caught the blade under his armpit to keep Xurek from recovering it. Xurek was then met with a massive fist that landed directly between the bridge of his nose and his brow, knocking him on his back. Korgak dropped his weapon, then sat atop of Xurek’s chest and began to hit him repeatedly. Korgak could end it in a second by drawing his knife, but Xurek knew that it would be too quick a death. Korgak wanted to relish and extend the agony in order to satisfy himself. Xurek covered his face with his arms, the heavy thuds of his elder half-brother’s fists slamming into him like stones. He knew that if he were knocked unconscious again, he would not wake up.

Korgak was larger than he, it was true, but he was also top heavy, and dumber. Xurek wrapped his long legs around the neck of Korgak and jerked him backward, throwing him off of his body. This gave Xurek enough time to get on all fours, but before he could stand up, the big orc slammed both fists into his back. The half-orc resisted the first hit, but a second hit sent him back to the ground, and blood welled up in his mouth. His lungs burned every time he took a breath, leading him to believe that at least one of them was bruised. Xurek struggled to get up, but now his lungs had been robbed of breath, and his strength sapped from his body. All he could do now was roll onto his back. Korgak returned to him moments later with his broadsword in hand. “Say hello to Hrasa for me!” he whispered so only his half-brother could hear him. Grasping his sword with both hands, Korgak pointed the blade downward, aiming to pin his bastard half-brother to the ground. Xurek ached all over, his body feeling broken and bent. What he would have given for Moonpaw’s help right now. The warg had saved him from a similar situation so many years ago, but now he was gone. The half-orc knew now there was no one coming, and no way out. If he were to survive, he would have to fight for it.

Thinking quickly, Xurek snatched the knife from his back and drove it into the knee of his attacker, the blade punching through the bone and out the back of Korgak’s leg, and then ripping it free. Korgak let out a long, piercing howl that echoed throughout the entire canyon as he ceased his attack and used his sword to prop himself up as his injured knee gave way. The on-looking orcs had ceased their jeering as they saw what happened to their hero. Calmly, Xurek put his knife away and stood to his feet, careful not to fall over, but also knowing that his half-brother was done. He kicked Korgak’s

sword away and then snatched up his own. Korgak sank to one knee as his wounded leg continued to gush black blood. Xurek tightly gripped his short-sword in his right hand, and with one clean swipe, decapitated his half-brother. Korgak's head fell to the ground and rolled several feet away. The black stump that had once been his neck spurted blood like a fountain. Before the body could topple to the ground, Xurek dropped his sword, grabbed the body by the shoulders, and began to greedily slurp up the sweet black fluid and suck the marrow from the neck bone. Ravenously, he ate until the blood stopped flowing and then bit off several chunks of Korgak's flesh, chewing every savory bite lustfully before swallowing. He had never tasted anything more delicious, nor had he felt such satisfaction as when he had seen his half-brother's head roll across the ground. He savored every moment of it, as if it were his first time to breathe.

After swallowing a second bite, Xurek suddenly stopped. He tasted the orc flesh in his mouth, and felt the warm sticky fluid all over his face and body. Looking at the corpse he held in his arms, he recoiled, and let the body fall as if disgusted by what he had done. All around him, the orcs who had expected to see him slaughtered remained silent. Xurek's eye caught the gaze of Golub, his excuse for a father, the chieftain's mouth hanging open with disbelief. Xurek growled at him angrily, an evil scowl crossing his face. Begrudgingly, he shoved his sword back into its scabbard, picked up the head of Korgak and hurled it, hitting his father hard in the chest, knocking him to the ground and taking the breath out of him. While he was temporarily distracted, Xurek mustered his strength and dragged the carcass of his enemy away from where it had fallen and shoved towards the orcs on the opposite side of him. Seeing the decapitated corpse of

one the largest orcs in their clan, instinct instantly took over. They swarmed onto Korgak's corpse and began tear it apart, devouring the flesh, cracking the bones and sucking out the marrow. Angry and yet more horrified, Golub roared loudly and charged the crowd of gorging orcs. He began to punch, curse, and shove his underlings away. By the time he was able to see the body, all that was left was a splintered ribcage, half a lacerated arm, and a handful of entrails which were strewn over the earth.

Xurek had rushed to his lover while Golub was preoccupied, and found her to still be alive, but barely. "Xurek...", she said before coughing up black spittle. "Don't speak," he said as he picked her up and slung her over his shoulders. Most of the other orcs in his clan were too busy watching Golub fight off nearly two dozen orcs to care about what a half-breed orc and his dying lover did. While they were distracted, Xurek snatched up his bow and quiver and began to run. Silently, he hoped that he and Hrasa would get out alive. It seemed too much to hope for. He had not gone far before he heard the angry roar of his father Golub. Above the noise of the frenzy, Golub bellowed out, "Kill him! Kill that bastard and his whore! Bring me their heads!"

Chapter 6

“Xurek...,” Hrasa mumbled as he began to quicken his pace. “Hold on, Hrasa,” he said under his breath. He could already hear them coming, their footsteps growing ever louder like a thundercloud before the lightning strikes. He had reached the front exit of the canyon, and turned only for a moment to see at least a dozen orcs had heard their chieftain’s orders and were rushing towards him. Seeing what was sure to be the death of both he and his mate, Xurek bolted into the canyon crevice, knowing that the narrowness of the exit would slow down those who sought his life because they would have to go in two at a time. He could feel Hrasa’s warm blood trickling down his shoulder and soaking his clothing. He needed to outrun these hunters and quickly so he could patch her up. It seemed that his plan was working, thus far. The canyon had slowed down his pursuers as he had hoped, for he could hear them bickering at the exit, arguing who should go in first. *Inbreds*, he thought. Breaking out into the open fields, he could see the forest in the distance. It was going to be a long dash, but one he must make, or die. His muscles screamed every time he took a step, and his lungs burned every time he breathed. The pounding he had taken from his late half-brother had nearly killed him, but knowing what would happen if he stopped running motivated him to keep going not only for his life, but for the life of Hrasa. An arrow struck the ground near his foot as he exited the canyon. Looking up, he saw the sentries, Vrep and Lop, firing down arrows at him. He hissed angrily at them as he ran. Lucky for him, both were terrible shots. Where

Xurek had been more careful as he made his way through the canyon, he sprang into a full dash, all the while carrying his wounded lover whose life hung in the balance.

He had made it nearly halfway to the forest, but then felt something *whoosh* inches past his ear. He heard it a second time. He glanced over his shoulder to see that his pursuers had emerged from the canyon, and now some had stopped to fire arrows. He kept running as more of the little instruments of death began to whiz past him and penetrate the ground. Xurek dared not look back now as he was within few hundred feet of the forest, his salvation close at hand. Without warning, a sharp pain entered his shoulder. He stumbled at the sudden pain and nearly fell, but he pressed on. An arrow had hit its mark, entering just to the right of his left shoulder blade and exiting underneath his collar bone. It had missed his heart by mere inches.

A few seconds later, he broke through the field and into the forest. Arrows were less likely to hit him now, but the tangle of undergrowth and trees would also make it harder for him to run. Small and light as Hrasa was, the arrow perforating his shoulder and his bruised lungs made it feel as if she weighed as much as a troll. With every stride, the arrow jostled his flesh, which hurt immensely. Ahead of him, Xurek saw a fallen tree. He sped up his pace and jumped over the obstacle, an arrow striking it just seconds later. Out of the corner of his eye, Xurek could see that Hrasa had passed out. His running and jumping proved to be too much for her to bear with a severe stab wound. Behind him, he could hear the rustling of leaves as the orcs who chased after him came ever closer. More arrows began to fly past him and strike earth, trees, and rocks. The half-orc made an effort to zigzag, and to keep trees and other objects between himself

and his enemies in order to confound their aim. Ahead of him, Xurek saw a knoll scattered with rocks and boulders and aligned with trees. Since he was not whole and carrying the weight of his she-orc companion, scaling up the knoll was a daunting task. Climbing up the knoll made it impossible for him to zigzag. Arrows continued to come ever closer to their mark. Had the situation been reversed, Xurek knew that he could have taken down a running target well before it reached the woods. If they kept shooting like this, they would eventually deplete their arrows and have to resort to hand-to-hand tactics, meaning they would have to catch up with him. Xurek had nearly made it over the small hill to the point that he could see the other side, but before he could leap downward, another arrow pierced his flesh, burying itself in his calf. The cruel surprise caused him to tumble forward, rolling down the other side of the knoll to the very bottom, dropping Hrasa as he fell. The moment when he lost his footing he remembered, but the fall downward he did not. The arrow that was lodged in his calf had been snapped off halfway down the shaft. The head was still in the meat of his leg, but the fall had twisted it to the point that it had torn his flesh even further. That explained why he didn't remember the fall. The excruciating pain from the broken arrow must have caused him to black out. The arrow in his shoulder was still intact. In the background, he could hear one of his attackers hooting loudly, "I got him! I got him! Felled him like a rotten tree!" He knew he had to hurry, or they would be on him like ants on a wounded field mouse. He found Hrasa not far from him. She was still nonresponsive, but still breathing. The arrows in his quiver lay scattered on the ground, but he had no time to gather them up.

Two orcs came charging down the knoll and were upon him before he could take Hrasa onto his shoulders again. The first took a misstep on the slanted ground as he came within killing range, and Xurek capitalized on his error, rapidly unsheathing his short-sword and plunging it into his guts. When he pulled back on his weapon, the blade was stuck. By then the second orc was on him. Having no weapon, Xurek snapped off the arrow which protruded from his shoulder, caught the armed fist of his enemy, and stabbed him in the throat. He then quickly yanked the other half of the arrow out of his flesh, and wrenched his blade free from his slain foe. He knew he'd need it soon. Rather too roughly, he slung the still unconscious Hrasa onto his shoulders and began to run again, the contorted arrow point in his leg slowing him. His pace was slowed even more. He had killed two of his pursuers, but that meant there were around ten not far behind him. They were so close now that he could hear them breathing. To his left he saw several orcs running at his pace, and to his right the same. Behind him were four others. It was a tactic he was familiar with. Whether it was game animals or enemies on the run, the tactic was one that orcs in the Black Blood Clan imitated from wolves, allowing them to encircle prey from all sides while giving chase. With his multiple wounds and slow pace, Xurek was thinking that he might as well give up; but he had to do something, even if it meant running towards his death. He soon found himself encircled by the hunters. All around him, frenzied orcs jeered, snarled, and cursed, brandishing their weapons. He knew now that it was over. As if he were preparing to go to sleep, he gently laid Hrasa on the ground, the orcs making no move to stop him out of what appeared to be some sort of odd deference. Standing over the she-orc's body, Xurek

straightened his posture, and readied to meet his end, on his feet and fighting, welcoming death like a hardened warrior.

The first orc came at him, and he parried his weapon away before slashing him across the belly, spilling his entrails on the ground. He turned around and saw that two of the orcs standing behind him were attempting to drag Hrasa away, but he tackled them both and drove his sword into the ribs of one and unsheathed his knife to stab the other in the head. Before he could get to his feet again, the remaining orcs had surrounded him and began to kick and bludgeon him. He could fight no more. The fatigue coupled with the pain of his wounds was now amplified a thousand times. He lay still, not bothering to defend himself. When his assailants stopped, he heard one of them say "Pick him up!" Two orcs lifted him by his arms and put him on his knees, holding him in place. He hung his head, unable to look into the eyes of his soon-to-be killer without effort. "Din't get far did ya, bastard?" said a grinning, snaggle-toothed orc. "First, we're gonna have a little fun with your whore while you watch. Then, we're going to put you out of your misery." The other orcs laughed loudly at hearing the prospect. The snaggle-toothed orc had those who held their prisoner turn him around to see that four of the other orcs were now looming over the still unconscious Hrasa. Tired and hurt as he was, Xurek found a small measure of strength and attempted to shake off his captors, but it wasn't enough. He watched in horror as one of the orcs standing in front of Hrasa drew out a knife and said, "We're gonna make a few adjustments first," and then knelt onto the ground to get closer to the she-orc.

Xurek watched helplessly. His only comfort the knowledge that Hrasa was unconscious. While the horrible scene began to unfold before his eyes, the half-orc suddenly heard the sound of approaching feet. They were fast-paced and soft as they hit the forest floor, not clumsy and loud like his fellow orcs. A howl erupted from the woods, and with it, a large brown wolf with graying fur: Moonpaw. The warg bounded upon Xurek's attackers and took the first orc with the knife behind the neck, shaking him like a rabbit before flinging him away. A second orc came at the old warg, but Moonpaw slammed him onto the ground with his massive paw before ripping his arm off with a single bite. The other two orcs were not so quick to attack. The ruckus of dying orcs and an angry warg filled the woods with noise and confusion, but in his head, Xurek heard his lupine companion's words loud and clear: "Take your female and run, young pup!" The warg charged the three orcs that held the half-orc captive, killing one in the process and leaving him with four enemies.

While the orcs were busy with Moonpaw, Xurek dragged Hrasa away and slung her back onto his shoulders before picking up his sword and knife, placing them back in their scabbards. Xurek's pace was ever slow, but he did as his friend had told him. He only stopped to look back once when he heard a sharp canine cry come from behind him. He could see that one of the orcs had shot an arrow into Moonpaw's flank while another jabbed a spear into his shoulder. Moonpaw collapsed for a moment before he shoved both of his attackers to the ground, ripping out the throat of one. The remaining three orcs began to stab the warg mercilessly with their weapons, red blood raining onto the dead leaves of the forest floor. He locked eyes with his half-orc friend who stared back

at him wide-eyed for one fleeting moment, “Go, pup!” Xurek felt as if he could not breathe, but he said back to his friend through his head speech, “Goodbye, friend.” Turning to run, he could hear Moonpaw’s dying wails and the loud, angry curses of the orcs as they continued to stab. Faintly, Xurek heard the squealing cry of another orc. Moonpaw had managed to kill one last enemy before he died.

Xurek continued to press on, though he felt like he was going to die at any moment. He could hear the remaining two orcs shouting and cursing as they tried to catch up to him. “Where’d he go?!” he heard the snaggle-toothed orc’s voice say, “This way!” he heard the other reply. Xurek knew that he could not fight them off. He would have been able to easily dispatch them with his bow, but he was out arrows. As he pressed on, the sound of rushing water filled his ears. Hobbling closer to the sound, ahead of him the forest opened up wider, and before him he saw a great river. *The Hoarwell*, he thought. The river was moving rapidly, and the way down was at least a hundred-foot drop.

He knew that it was now or never. He knew he could not fight them, but he also knew that the river would probably kill him with its hidden rocks and swelling rapids. Unbuckling his belt, he held Hrasa to his front and buckled her tightly to himself. He gripped his unstrung bow tightly in his hand, placing the string between his teeth. He could see the two remaining orcs coming after him. Without another thought as to what to do, he leapt.

Cascading cold enveloped Xurek’s entire body as he plummeted into the Hoarwell’s icy waters. He was thankful that the water was deep where he landed, and

not shallow or full of rocks. Now that he knew that he and Hrasa were alive, the first thing he wanted to do was breathe. He could see the surface above him, but the current nearly made it impossible for him to move to the top. Hrasa, unconscious, was more likely to drown than he was. Going with the flow of the river, Xurek cautiously swam upward. When he finally broke the surface, he sucked in air until it filled his lungs. He tried his best to make sure Hrasa could breathe, but the water that thrashed him about made it difficult. For all he knew, he was carrying dead weight. Nevertheless, he made every effort to keep her head above water. He heard her cough several times, expelling water from her nostrils and mouth, a sign that she was still living, but for how much longer he did not know. Passing several large rocks which stabbed through the surface of the water, he could see the two orcs who had killed Moonpaw staring at down at him and his companion as they were carried downstream, far away from the clan and the life that they had once known.

For over a quarter of an hour, Xurek let the river sweep him and Hrasa away. It was not so much that he wanted to put distance between himself and his attackers as he did not have the strength to fight the current. But when the river's current began to slow, he fought with what was left in him until he reached the shore, dragging Hrasa with him. Wet sand seeped into his wounds and stung him. On the shore, Xurek carried the she-orc to a drier place. He laid her gently on the ground and began to examine her wounds. She had many bruises from the fall they had taken, and from being tossed around the river, but the most severe injury was the puncture wound that that started in her back and exited her chest. From the way she was breathing, he could see that one of her lungs was

punctured, her chest rising and falling only on one side. Quickly, he removed her armor and clothing, until she was bare, and then made a crude bandage from a piece of his own clothing which he wadded up to cover her puncture wound. Taking her in the crook of his arm, cradling her like an orcling, Xurek held her tightly, drawing Hrasa's face close to his own. "Hrasa," he said touching her face. "Hrasa!" he said louder. Slowly, Hrasa's eyes fluttered open, glazed as if drunken. "Xurek?" she said confused. "Yes, it is Xurek," he replied, stroking a strand of her hair away from her face. "You're alive..." she said. "So are you," he replied. She coughed several times, a trickle of black blood seeping out of the crack of her mouth. Hrasa let out a weak laugh, "I'm done. My life is spent..." She stopped speaking only for a moment to swallow and catch her breath, "But, this...this is not the death I wanted for myself. Dying like some wretch's whore." "No!" Xurek interjected. "You will not die, nor have you lost your honor. I have avenged you." Her eyes grew wide with excitement. "Korgak?" she asked, not needing to say another word. The half-orc nodded his head emphatically. Hrasa laughed weakly and smiled, "Leave it to you, Xurek, and you will always come through for me." It seemed that with every word she said, and every breath she expelled, her life slipped away a little more. Xurek shook his head frantically at what she had said, "No, I didn't come through for you. I let him harm you. I let him..." he began to say before she interrupted, "No. You did. You took my honor back. You did not allow me to die in vain." "You are not going to die!" the half-orc exclaimed, his voice and body trembling. "Xurek, you know it as well as I do...We've seen battle many times over...wounds like these are a death knell," said Hrasa, a smile on her dying face which began to pale as

moments passed. “Don’t leave me,” Xurek said, holding her even closer. “If you leave me, I’ll be alone.” Hrasa coughed again, but as she did so, she took his hand and closed it into fist, slamming it into his chest. “You are stronger...you are smarter...and you are greater than they,” she said, her voice pained, and her eyes angry. “You’ve always been alone, for you are one of kind. You must come to terms and embrace your destiny,” she said. “I don’t want to face this life without you!” Xurek said desperately. “It does not matter what you want!” Hrasa said, mustering her strength, her anger causing her to cough harshly. Xurek fell silent, wanting to hear all she had to say before she departed. “You are one of the finest warriors I have ever known. Brave, strong, and resilient; never caving to the thoughts of others. And that is why I have loved you. Even for those like you, there is purpose in this world,” she said. “But what is that purpose?” he asked. “You know. We live and die by the will of Sauron. Do not fight it, embrace it,” she replied. “Bugger Sauron! He can find some other to do his will!” came Xurek’s reply. “You cannot run from it. It is the fate of every orc. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, he will call you back for his purpose,” she said. “I’m not an orc,” Xurek said. “Even so, orcish blood flows through your veins,” came her retort. Xurek went silent and held Hrasa, listening to the steady beat of her heart as it began to fade. “Goodbye, my mate...my shadow...,” said Hrasa as she licked his cheek. Looking at her, he could see a weak smile, masking her pain, cross her face. She breathed out several times until her spirit left her body, her eyes still open, and the smile on her face diminishing. Hanging his head, Xurek closed shut her eyes and licked her cheek, his final kiss to her. Suddenly he felt his eyes beginning to burn. He felt warm wet fluid

trickling down his face. At first, he thought it was blood until one of the droplets made its way into his mouth, and he tasted the saltiness. This was something he had never seen happen to any other orc in his clan, much less himself. He had seen humans do it before, especially women and children who begged for their worthless lives. More of the clear warm fluid began to emerge from his eyes as a mixture of anger and sorrow began to well up on his chest. He held Hrasa's body to himself, seeking for comfort where there was none to be found. He threw back his head and howled loudly, his hoarse cries echoing throughout the peaks of the Misty Mountains.

With no daylight left, Xurek moved Hrasa's body back to the waters of the Hoarwell. Never, in his entire life, had the half-orc seen any of his kind take care in burying the dead. Most who fell on the battlefield were left to stay where they lay. If need be, the bodies might be butchered for food. The only one that might expect any sort of proper burial was an orc chieftain, or a king whose corpse would be dressed in his armor, seated in a high-backed chair, his weapons placed across his lap, and a full drinking horn put in his hand. A feast would usually follow, and a night of feasting and games which usually entailed multiple combatants dying. The body would then be left in the chair to rot until only the bones were left. After some time, the bones would be placed in a mound, along with dead one's weapons and armor, and then covered. No orc dared touch the body, nor attempted to eat the flesh, lest he bring down the wrath of the deceased warrior's spirit. A single bone would be taken by the heir and made into some sort of adornment, such as an earring, a necklace, or the handle of a knife, so that his spirit would remain with the next leader and continue to guide him as he led the others.

This, however, would only be done for a leader who was honored and respected by his successor. Xurek would have gladly given his companion such a burial, but with no one to celebrate, nor the time or strength to do so, he was forced to do something other. He had seen how humans buried their dead. After a certain raid, he and the other orcs had dug up several graves, thinking them to be treasure troves, only to find corpses. Most human graves were simple, consisting of hole dug about six feet deep, and covered over with stones, but the large headstones were adorned with some sort of writing which they could not understand. Most goblinkind could not read the black speech, therefore human speech was a total mystery to them. Sadly, he would not be able to give Hrasa even the most meager burial. Not wanting to leave her where she lay, he gently placed her into the waters of the Hoarwell. He only regretted that he had no weapon to send with her, for he could not give up his own. However, she did have her knife, which was still in its scabbard when she died. It was not the best weapon to leave with one of the greatest warriors he had ever known, but it was something. The knife was Hrasa's first weapon, as it was for all orcs.

Finally summoning up the resolve to let go, Xurek pushed Hrasa's body into the river until the current caught her, and she drifted downstream. "Rest well, brave warrior," he said, watching until she was no longer in sight. Xurek looked up to see the stars had come out of hiding accompanied by the moon's pale shining face. To most orcs, even the minimal light from the moon and stars irritated them as a sunlight irritated most night creatures, but it did not bother him in the least. With no fire to guide him in the night, the heavenly bodies were a welcome friend. Before he left where he was, he

had to see to his wounds. There was little he could do for his bruised lungs except to let them heal, but his arrow wounds were another matter. The arrow wound in his shoulder was not irreparable. It had passed cleanly through the flesh without harming the bone. *Lucky*, thought Xurek. Like he had done before, Xurek took a handful of black dirt which he had found next to a nearby tree and packed the wound. The other wound, however, was a nasty thing to behold. The arrow was contorted in the flesh, turned at an ugly angle. The wound slowed his pace so miserably that he would be unable to cover much ground. Xurek knew that he had to remove the bitter object from his flesh. At the moment, he was unsure what sort of arrow afflicted him. Some arrows were barbed and jagged to cause excruciating pain to their victims, while others were rounded and smooth so that they would be better suited for armored foes, and easy to recover. There was only one way to find out. Carefully, he grasped what remained of the shaft of the arrow and gave it a slight tug. A surge of agony worked its way up from his leg all the way to his spine. He knew that he needed to pull harder to know for sure if it indeed was barbed, so reluctantly, he pulled again, this time much harder. The half-orc bit down hard on his tongue, drawing blood; the arrow point snagging his flesh as he pulled. As Xurek had feared, the point was most certainly barbed. He cursed loudly as he knew what he had to do next; as if being bludgeoned, beaten, and shot twice wasn't bad enough! Angrily, he sat down with his back braced against a large fir tree. Taking a fat rounded stick, he placed it between his teeth and readied himself. What he would give for a skin of strong drink right now. He knew that he had to try his damndest not to pass out. If he so much as blacked out, he could die from this untreated wound. He knew that the best choice

was to do it quickly. Checking his grip to make sure that he would not scrape his shin bone with the sharp edge of the arrowhead, Xurek violently pushed the arrow through his flesh until it punched through the meat of his shin. He suppressed his screams as he bit down angrily on the stave in his mouth, his fangs burying themselves into the wood. He stopped pushing when he could see the point protruding completely out of his flesh. The only relief at seeing such an awful sight was the fact that even though the arrow was indeed barbed, it had a small head. He pounded the ground with his fist, as if begging an unseen foe for mercy. When the pain subsided enough, he pulled the rest of the arrow out of his wound until the shaft was completely free of his flesh. Blood began to seep out, some in thick chunky trickles, telling him that some blood trapped inside the wound had already begun to clot. The pain of the pull was bad, but not nearly as bad as the push. As he had his shoulder wound, Xurek also packed the other with dirt. With the arrow removed, he knew that he could walk much easier, but still, his pace was far too slow. He doubted that Golub would send a hunting party after him. Given his wounds and the plummet he had taken in the river, he doubted that any of them expected him to be alive, but he wanted to cover ground and get to a safe place. He had no idea what dwelt in these woods, be it wild men, elves, a derelict group of dwarves, or worse. He rested himself for only a moment, watching the fireflies shine their lanterns on and off, and listening to the sound of crickets chirping along with the calls of wolves echoing through the mountains. He only hoped that they were not hungry for orc flesh.

Rising to his feet, Xurek looked around for a stick which he could use as a crutch. Near the tree where he seated himself, he found a branch that had been snapped

off. Taking his knife, he trimmed off the excess branches until all that remained was a straight stick which forked at one end. The wood was still white underneath, assuring him that the branch was not rotten. Placing the fork under his arm, he put his weight onto the walking stave, and began to move forward. At first, it was difficult, but once Xurek found his rhythm, he made his way to river bank. Lowering himself down, he drank a belly full of cold water from the Hoarwell. With his thirst quenched, he felt that it would stave off any hunger.

Within the passing hours of the night, Xurek treaded through the woods, his body growing weaker with every step. He walked for what seemed like two hours until his eyes became heavy, and his vision began to blur. It was like sleep was taking him over, threatening to drag him into its gloomy world even as he stood on his feet. He walked only a few more feet until he collapsed on the ground. His vision faded for a moment, but he knew that he should not sleep out in the open. Exhausted as he was, he managed to crawl towards a clump of trees surrounded many ferns. He crawled into the midst of the low growing plants which covered him enough to keep him out of sight. Xurek rolled over onto his back and gazed at the starry sky until darkness overtook both his eyes and mind. He had no idea if the treatment he had given his wounds would suffice. For all he knew, he would bleed out and die while he slept. In all honesty, he found the proposition welcoming. If it happened, he would join Hrasa in the land of the dead. The last thing he remembered hearing was his own tongue which whispered, "Hrasa..."

Chapter 7

Golub had eagerly awaited the return of the hunting party who had set out after his bastard and the she-orc, but when they returned, he was met with utter disappointment. Two of a dozen who had pursued the half-orc had returned empty-handed. “Where are the others?” he asked anxiously. “Dead,” replied a snaggle-toothed orc. “He killed five of us.” “What of the others?” Golub retorted. The snaggle-toothed orc spoke again, “Moonpaw. That mangy warg killed the rest trying to save that bastard! We done in for him.” The other orc who had been carrying a dripping brown sack over his shoulder upended it, a massive, red-stained, canine head spilling onto the ground. “And?” Golub said, losing his patience. The snaggle-toothed orc swallowed nervously, seeing that his chieftain was dissatisfied with his answers, “We chased him down to a cliff, and he jumped with the she-orc into the Hoarwell.” “You let him get away?!” Golub growled. The two orcs looked panicked as Golub voiced his displeasure. “No! We got two arrows in him before he jumped. He took one hell of a beating from Korgak, and that river is more treacherous than a dull knife! Ain’t no doubt, he’s dead.” Golub was silent. The snaggle-toothed orc was grinning at first, hoping that his answer was satisfactory, but it faded when he realized that his chieftain was still very angry. His anger was buried, brooding, and readying to strike like an adder. The orc warlord paced in front of them, his eyes never breaking his stare. “Ain’t no doubt?” Golub reiterated. Neither orc who stood before him said anything before he spoke again. “I commanded you to kill my bastard and his whore. I commanded you to bring me their heads. You

bring the head of some bitch-spawned outcast, then you assure me that he is dead beyond doubt...but you cannot be certain that he is dead beyond doubt, can you?...Do either of you know how to assure someone is dead beyond doubt?" The orcs looked at each other as if trying to derive an answer, but again, they said not a word. Golub stopped his pacing and stood closely to them. He then answered his own question, "You watch him die." Without warning, the snaggle-toothed orc's head exploded like an egg in a vice, a black mush of skull, brain, and blood spraying into the night air. The other orc appeared dumbstruck as his companion who had been standing there only moments ago had suddenly burst asunder. Realizing he was in danger, the second orc broke his stare away from his dead comrade, turning his gaze towards what sounded like chains rattling. He could see that Golub had unleashed his flail which usually hung at his belt. It was an ugly thing made of a two foot haft wrapped in leather. On the other end was a foot-and-a-half long chain that ended in a spiked ball the size of a fist. The orc panicked and began to back out of the range of Golub's weapon, but the fool tripped over Moonpaw's severed head. He reached for his sword, but before his hand could move the blade an inch from the scabbard, two orcs hoisted him up by his arms and carved a slash in his throat, his blood spilling onto the ground. Golub stood up straight, his Uruk-hai heritage clearly showing through. He wiped his face with his forearm, sweeping away black blood which had splattered onto him. He breathed deeply, feeling relief and pleasure. "Failure is not an option for those of us in the Black Blood Clan," he said to the others, resting his weapon on his shoulder. Kicking the dead body nearest him, Golub then said, "Get these butchered, and get rid of that mutt's head. It's beginning to stink."

Several orcs came forward and gathered what remained of their fellow orcs, fearful of having the same done to them if they disobeyed.

As the night wore on, Golub had demanded that Korgak be given the proper honors due him after his passing. He had set out his personal high-backed chair, a crude thing, and in it he put what remained of Korgak's body. At first, those under his command were reluctant to obey, finding it odd to give such honor to an orc that was never a warlord, king, or chieftain; they obeyed nonetheless. What resulted was a farce of what would have been given to an orc of great importance. The eviscerated corpse was set in the chair, the head sitting where its lap would have been, along with his weapons. Korgak's ugly face stared wide-eyed at all who passed by. There was not food enough for the clan to have a celebratory feast, so Korgak only allowed his captains and closest of companions to attend. Their meal was the cooked flesh of the two orcs who had failed to bring Xurek's head to Golub. The orc chieftain ordered a guard placed around his son's remains, fearing that those who had already tasted his flesh would want more. He made sure that Korgak's horn was full of ale before he and his friends sat down to their meal.

As the hour passed, Golub gnawed on a bone and tore off a piece of flesh with his fangs. To wash it down, he tilted back his drinking horn and downed nearly half the ale in it when suddenly he heard the sentry horn sound in the distance. The sudden interruption caused him to choke. He coughed several times, spitting up the ale caught in his throat before he leapt to his feet. The chieftain had not been expecting anything this night. He wondered what it could be. Fearing it could be another attack from Rivendell

elves, he shouted for all to arm themselves as he pulled his flail from his belt. His eyes darted to the front exit of the canyon, and he could see one the sentries running from the large crack in the canyon. It was Vrep. The look on spindly orc's face was terrified, and he shouted a single word repeatedly, "*Nazgul! Nazgul!*" Behind him came the thunder of hooves echoing through the canyon's crevice.

Four hooded, black figures emerged from the crack in the canyon, mounted on equally black horses whose forms merged with that of their riders, making them appear as if they were hellish four-legged monsters. A shrill, high-pitched scream echoed as the wraiths entered the camp. Vrep slowed his pace as he turned to see the four *Nazgul* mere feet from him. Before he could move out of the way, the black riders' horses trampled the spindly orc under their hooves. The wraiths let out another cry, and many of the orcs ran for shelter while others covered their ears in fear. They came bounding towards the torchlight where the Golub and his captains feasted. Golub felt a primal fear overtake him at seeing the demented figures, but he stood his ground not wanting to show cowardice among fellow orcs. The *Nazgul* came closer, showing no sign of slowing their pace. Golub feared that he would be trampled like Vrep, but he did not move. As the four mounted wraiths came within feet of colliding with the orc chieftain, they suddenly halted. One *Nazgul* in the center pulled up on its horse's reigns, and the big black beast reared on its hind legs and kicked its front hooves repeatedly, coming within inches of Golub's face before slamming back down to the earth. Golub's captains cowered, shrinking low to the ground as their leader stood alone in front of the *Nazgul*. There were few things that orcs were afraid of, but the hell-spawned, roving wraiths of Mordor were

definitely some of the most feared creatures for goblin-kind. Golub had only seen one when he was younger, and he hoped he would never see one again. Back when Bolg's army marched on the Lonely Mountain, he had received his commission from a *Nazgul* who had brought him his orders from the dark lord himself. Since the Slaughter at Worm's Lair, he suspected that the *Nazgul* and Sauron were finished with him and the other survivors due to their failure; but now their presence was a reminder that even the Black Blood Clan was not beyond the reach of the dark lord's will. The center *Nazgul* glared at him from under its hood, but Golub could not see its eyes, nor its face. Despite this, Golub could feel dark eyes burrowing into his very soul, and tormenting him. The wraith's gaze turned to Golub's captains to his right, and then to its left before coming back to Golub. "Word has reached Mordor, Golub son of Grak," it said in a raspy voice that came out in a loud whisper. "Your clan is marching soon." "What of it?" Golub said, his voice showing an obvious sign of feigned boldness. "Do you think that your venture has gone unheard of? We know that you march to west," said the *Nazgul*. "How do you know that?" asked Golub, a slight hint of anger in his voice. "We have many spies in many places. Do you think we have forgotten you? We have been keeping eyes on you since the day you fled from the Lonely Mountain." The fact that these foul creatures were keeping track of their every move only served to prove the validity of their battle cry, "By the will of Sauron." "What do you want with us?" Golub demanded of the *Nazgul*, hoping to get straight to the point and be rid of the foul creature's presence. "Your march to the west is not of any coincidence. The dark lord wishes to employ you once again," said the wraith. The four phantoms turned their mounts to the

left and began to slowly trot in a circle around the big orc who stood in their center. Golub's grip on the haft of his flail tightened as they circled him. As one of the *Nazgul* continued to speak, he could hear its voice loud and clear, but now that all four of them were circling him, and all their gazes fixed upon him, they all looked the same, and the voice was coming from all directions, making him uncertain as to where it was coming from. It was as if when one spoke, another finished the sentence. "The land that you wish to raid is one which the dark lord has taken great interest in. Something about this place calls to him, and it grows stronger day by day." Golub clenched his teeth and said in an aggressive tone, "Sauron can find some other dog to do his bidding!" All four wraiths hissed, "Such talk is unwise. You know that you cannot refuse a command from your master. To deny his call is to deny your very nature. You will have the village and all the supplies you will need to stave off winter's bite, but there is a condition which your lord demands." As if by some magic that fell over him, Golub's tone and demeanor radically changed from defensive to submissive. "What is it that Lord Sauron wishes?" he asked, his tone as stoic as a stone. "One of the halflings possesses something. Something which belongs to the dark lord," said the *Nazgul*. "Halflings?" asked Golub. "They are the people which inhabitant the land. They will pose no threat to you. You and your clan can have everything within, but this one thing you must surrender to the master," replied the wraith. "And what is this *one thing*?" Golub asked. "It is not your concern. When you have razed the village, find one called Baggins, do not forget that name. Take him alive, and wait for our coming." "By the will of Sauron," said Golub, affirming the *Nazgul*'s orders. "Good. We shall return to you, soon" said one of the

wraiths. With those words, they ceased their circling and then sped off towards the exit of the canyon, their hellish shrieks echoing through the crags as they vanished into the night.

Golub stood frozen, as if his mind were elsewhere. His heart was beating normally, and his countenance was calm. One of his captains had come close to him and said, “Chieftain?” “Prepare the others, we break camp tomorrow,” came his reply.

Chapter 8

For what seemed like the first time in a long time. Xurek had slept without having a single dream. It was like he was so tired that even his dreams were too fatigued to play out in his mind. He awoke feeling warm as the morning sun began to gently heat his body. He had not yet opened his eyes, and felt content to lie down among the ferns where he had fallen the night before. His sleep was interrupted when he felt something hopped over his body. He only caught a glimpse of what it was for a moment, a fluffy cotton tail blurring before his eyes, revealing it to be a rabbit. Still tired, he rolled over and closed his eyes once more, but trying to go to sleep was impossible.

He felt a slight stab of pain in his shoulder. Thinking it was a biting insect, he slapped at it. But then it came again. Fearing that he had been found by his father's hunters, Xurek swiftly unsheathed his knife and readied himself for whatever attack came next, his fangs gnashed and bared. His hand relaxed when he saw what had jabbed him. Looking up from where he lay, he saw that a stick had jabbed him, and on the other end of it, stood a human. Of all the humans Xurek had encountered, this one appeared to be male, and a child by human standards. He stared wide-eyed like a frightened deer, obviously startled. Once Xurek determined that he was not in immediate danger, he relaxed his hand, and let his snarl fade. The little human backed up a few feet, dropping his stick, while Xurek turned away and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The half-orc then tried to stand up, but the surge of pain that flooded his body caused him to fall back to ground. He scowled with a bitter hiss from his lips, cursing as he did so. The pain

primarily came from his leg. The wound has swollen, and tender to the touch. The early onsets of infection had begun to set in. He knew that he had to clean out the wound and cauterize it soon if he was to live. “Are...are you hurt?” Xurek turned his head towards the human, nearly forgetting he was there. His eyes were still wide as he stared back, a mixture of excitement and fright on his face. The half-orc understood his words perfectly. Throughout his life, the black speech had been his primary tongue, but some orcs had picked up the common tongue of men. Nearly half of the orcs in the Black Blood Clan, especially the older ones, knew the tongue well. Hrasa and Xurek had picked up on words here and there, practicing with each other when they were alone. Most orcs who could speak in the tongues of men found the language to roll off their own orcish tongues like water. Sometimes, he and Hrasa were able to pick up new words from human prisoners they had captured on raids. However, they rarely were able to interact with them before they were later killed, butchered, and eaten. He had never actually had a real conversation with a human before. The closest he had come to doing so was on his bleeding day, but that was quickly ruined by Korgak.

It had been sometime since Xurek and Hrasa had attempted to converse in the common tongue of men, so he thought carefully as he formed his words. “Yee...ess. I am hurt,” he said in a gruff, broken voice. The boy’s demeanor seemed to brighten as he understood the strange creature that lay before him, but his glee soon turned back to caution. “Can I help you? What do you need?” Xurek wiped the sweat from his brow, and sniffed loudly. “I need a needle. And a thread,” he replied, his speech slow. “I can get you that, but I have to return home first. I need to bring home a rabbit for my

mother,” the boy said. Xurek sniffed the air loudly. He remembered the rabbit that had leapt over him only moments ago. He could still smell, and taste, its scent on the gentle morning breeze. It was close. Xurek parted the fern leaves in front of him. There, huddled against a tree was the rabbit. With a quick flick of his wrist, Xurek’s knife bolted from his hand and pinned the creature to the tree. The little animal squealed loudly as the blade penetrated its feeble body. The knife had entered its flesh in between its ribs and hind legs. “There’s your rabbit,” Xurek said above the screams. The boy rushed towards the rabbit and pulled the blade free before snapping the neck of the tiny creature. Xurek held out his hand, and the boy slowly placed the knife into it. The young human then tied the rabbit to his belt before saying “I’ll come back later.” The half-orc was skeptical. For all he knew, the boy would bring back more humans who would kill him, but for now he was at the boy’s mercy.

With the human out of sight, Xurek began to ready himself yet again for another painful task. He had hobbled around on his makeshift crutch and gathered enough wood to build a fire. He could find no stones to put around his fire, so he encircled it with thicker pieces of wood. He had licked the fresh rabbit blood from his knife before sheathing it. He needed the nourishment as much as a fish needed water. He cursed himself for giving that rabbit over to the human, for now his stomach panged with hunger. He was able to quench his thirst from the dew clinging to the ferns and the moss that covered a log nearby, but dared not touch the water in his skin, for he would need it later. He would need a supply of water to refill his skin, and soon. Xurek had built his fire small so that he could put it out quickly should he need to beat a hasty retreat, laying

the logs in a cross-section pattern so that they could be pulled apart. This would buy him time should he be in immediate danger of discovery. First, Xurek set the blade of his knife into the burning embers. While it heated, he began to clean out his wound. The blood had dried around the dirt making a seal over the exposed flesh. Using his short claws, he began to dig it out. Most of it came out with ease, but as the wound went deeper, the pain began to set in when he accidentally scraped the tender flesh. To clean the rest of his wound, Xurek used a small amount of water from his skin. Satisfied that it was cleaned enough, he removed his knife from the embers. The blade that was once entirely black had turned bright red. Xurek's stomach turned over at seeing it. He knew that if he did not go through with it he would eventually die. Biting down on the same stick he had used the night before, he pressed the knife against the flesh of his calf. The flesh began to stink as the blazing hot knife began to cook it. His vision began to blacken as he tried desperately to hold his knife steady. Xurek bit down so hard on the stick in his mouth that it snapped in two. No matter how bad the pain, he kept the knife in place until he was for sure that all the infection was killed and the flesh properly cauterized. The thought of having to do it again made him feel ill. Before Xurek could black out completely, he removed his knife and fell back onto the earth, a rush of fleeting pain and relief coursing through him. But, his elation was short-lived. Just as he had fallen to the earth, he remembered that he had a second wound in his shoulder that needed the same treatment.

After tending to his last arrow wound, Xurek's pain tolerance had passed its threshold. He passed out once the procedure was done. He was later awakened by a hand

on his shoulder that continued to shake him until he awakened. The human he had met earlier that morning had returned. The half-orc opened his eyes, and could see that his fire had burned down to smoldering embers, and that the sky was black and spangled with stars. The boy stopped shaking him when he sat up. He backed away, startled when Xurek sat straight up with a jolt. "You hungry?" said the boy timidly. Xurek wiped his eyes and said as articulately in the human tongue as he could, "Yah." He could see his new human companion was carrying a sack over his shoulder. The human dropped it on the ground and began to rummage through it, pulling out what appeared to be the split hoof of some animal. Xurek's nose immediately caught the scent which told him that it was pork. Along with the pig's foot, the boy also pulled out a hearty haunch of meat. After the meat came a heel of bread, a wedge of hard cheese, and a jug of something. He tossed the items to Xurek one at a time. With the smell of food heavily in his nostrils, the half-orc began to aggressively devour the pig's foot until nothing was left but the hoof and the knuckle bones. The half-orc tossed the remains into his dying fire, and then threw on a handful of twigs to bring the flames to life once more. The coals began to lick up the tiny bits of wood while Xurek started on the haunch of pork. His fangs tore the sweet meat from the bone as he ate. When there was none left to eat, Xurek cracked open the bone and ate the equally sweet marrow until there was not a morsel left. By then, the fire had built itself up. Xurek tossed the bone into the flames, and then put on four thick logs. The familiar feeling of eyes watching him caused the half-orc to turn his head to the left where he saw that the boy had sat down near a tree, and was staring at him. The half-orc only watched him for a moment before continuing to eat the cheese

and bread. Downing the food, Xurek uncorked the leather jug and tasted its contents. To his pleasure, Xurek found it to be some sort of wine, but not the sort he was used to. Orcish wine was very thick and strong, and burned like fire when drunk. This human wine was lighter, refreshing, and sweeter than any orcish concoction he had tasted. Xurek took several long gulps of the liquid before plugging the hole. As he finished his meal, the half-orc turned his head to the left again. The boy had not averted his eyes from him. “What you lookin’ at?” Xurek said in the common tongue, slightly annoyed. “Sorry,” said the human. “Sorry” was a word which he was not familiar with. Xurek looked at the human confused, as if asking him to repeat what he had said. “I apologize?” the boy said, trying to get his new companion to understand his speech. “I...did not mean to offend?” As best as the half-orc could gather, the human was trying to express some sort of remorse. A weak emotion, indeed. Feeling he had grasped the concept enough, Xurek gave the human a sharp nod.

Turning back to the fire, Xurek could see that the flames had resurrected and started to eat away at the dry logs as greedily as Xurek had eaten his food. The half-orc took a stick and stirred the coals. The glow of the fire began to warm Xurek’s skin, a welcome luxury given the cool of night. Out of the corner of his yellow eye, he could see the boy shivering and trying to warm his arms. When Xurek paid him no mind, he began to do so more vigorously. “Mind if I share the warmth?” said the boy, his voice anxious. Xurek was beginning to feel more perturbed by his human companion. Rather than attempt to form words, he shrugged his head to his side and signaled for the boy to come sit by the fire. The human sat on the other side of the flames, holding his hands out to

warm them. The boy smiled widely as his small body began to warm, and now it was Xurek who watched him curiously. Even more curious, Xurek said, “Why?” The boy looked at him as if waiting for something. That’s when Xurek remembered he had hardly asked a question to begin with. “Umm...Why...are you...not afraid?” he finally said recalling the common tongue. The young human eyed him strangely. “Well, I won’t say I’m not, but I’ve never seen anything like you,” he said. Xurek was taken aback by his answer, but he said nothing further. Could it be that this human had never heard of orcs before? But then again, Xurek remembered that he was not an orc. “What...What are you?” the boy asked curiously. The question the half-orc had been hoping to avoid reared its head. The half-orc thought carefully. If the human was so naïve that he knew absolutely nothing of orcs, the half-orc thought it better not to disturb him with tales of such people. *My people*, Xurek corrected himself. He had been estranged from his orcish family. He had proven himself time and time again, but the fact of his lineage always made him an object of distrust and alienation. Now that he sat across the fire from this human, a feeling that he had not experienced since his bleeding began to come over him. Xurek was not a true orc, for his mother had been a human. Yet, neither was Xurek a true human. As his friend Moonpaw had once said not so long ago, he was something different. “I am...,” the half-orc hesitated, “...nothing.” The boy did not press him any further, and accepted his answer without question.

Rather than let the complete silence of the forest drift off into the crackling of the fire, Xurek reached into the sack the human had brought him and removed a spool of thread and a bone needle. As he began to thread the needle, Xurek realized that this

would be the first wound he had to stitch himself. In the fifteen years he had walked Middle Earth, Hrasa had been the one to patch his injuries, but she was gone now. His shoulder needed no stitching due to the arrow passing clean through and leaving a small hole in his flesh, the knife he had used to cauterize it sealing it shut. The back of his leg, however, needed it badly. After the fall he had taken in the forest, the arrow had mangled the flesh in such a way that it left it exposed. Painfully, but surely, he finished the stitching until the wound was completely sealed. The human had watched eagerly as he did so. Why he did so was a mystery to Xurek, but he let him watch without interruption. To finish it off, the half-orc cut the excess thread with his knife. He then placed the needle and thread back into the sack and settled down next to the fire. Xurek uncorked the skin of wine and took another long swallow, licking his short protruding fangs as he corked the skin again. He turned his face towards the boy as he offered him a drink. The boy jolted back as he saw Xurek's eyes which shone like that of a wolf in the firelight. Xurek tossed the skin aside at seeing the human's reaction. "Sorry," the young human said. There was that word again. Xurek poked the stick into the fire, ignoring the boy's words.

Out of his field of vision, Xurek had not noticed that at the boy's feet lay his short sword tucked inside its scabbard, the baldric wrapped neatly around it. Without warning the boy picked up the weapon, and unsheathed it, the blackened steel scraping the scabbard with a metallic *hiss*. Xurek turned his head rapidly to see the human holding his sword. He snarled angrily and drew out his knife. In a flash of a second, he had knocked the sword from the boy's hand, and was on top of him, his knife pressed at

the pale skin of the human's throat. The human's eyes were as wide as eggs, and his breathing rapid. Tears began to trickle down the cracks of the boy's eyes, but he did not scream out. The half-orc's fist was clenched tightly around the neck of the boy's shirt, and he could feel his victim trembling. Baring his fangs, Xurek let a subtle, angry growl echo from his throat. He stared at the human with the unmistakable gaze of a vicious predator. He was a wolf in humanoid form, and the prey beneath him, a defenseless lamb. The boy had meant no harm, and was truly frightened. Realizing this, Xurek snorted loudly and let his anger subside, "Do not touch my weapons...Ever!" Xurek moved away, and took his place next to the fire, sheathing his knife and short-sword. The boy sat up slowly, his breathing fast and labored. He sat next to the fire again, this time with more caution than he had before. Thinking the situation over, the half-orc felt that he had been too harsh. At seeing the frail human sitting across from him, the half-orc knew his new companion had only been curious with no intent on harming him. Feeling somewhat remorseful, Xurek cleared his throat and repeated the unfamiliar word that he had heard twice already, and still didn't fully understand, "Sorry." The boy's head perked up. The half-orc only hoped that he had not been mistaken in the meaning of the word. To his satisfaction, the nervous smile that came over the boy's face relieved him of such fears.

Nearly an hour passed as the two shared the fire. Neither said much, but the boy did take a swig of the wine after Xurek had offered it to him a second time. Xurek put it away when the skin was half-empty. He dared not indulge in more than he could handle. Dulling his senses more than they already were in such a weakened state was neither

wise nor safe. He did not know if his father had decided to give up the chase, or to continue on to the strange land that his scouts had discovered. In either case, Xurek could not be too careful. Later, the boy stood to his feet and said, "I best be getting home before my mum and da notice I'm gone." The half-orc looked at him, but did not say anything. When he did not answer, the young human continued to speak. "I hunt in this part of the forest all the time. I will bring you food and drink when I come." Xurek nodded his head acknowledging him. "There is a stream just in that direction," the boy continued to say as he pointed in the direction beyond the fire, "It's not too far. You can fill your water skin there. And I would not make your fires 'til night. My da might be suspicious of smoke coming from the forest." After he finished, Xurek turned his attention back to the fire. "By the way," the boy spoke up again suddenly, "what do I call you?" The half-orc looked back at his companion and said, "Xurek." "Xurek?" the boy said, wanting to make sure he said his name correctly. "Hmm!" Xurek nodded sharply with approval. "What I call you?" he asked the boy. "Falks" the boy answered. "Falks?" Xurek repeated. "Aye," Falks said approvingly. "Well, goodnight to ya," said Falks as he disappeared into the night.

As the night grew darker, and the fire began to burn out, Xurek put on more logs and then made himself comfortable. The night, lucky for him, was cool rather than cold, which meant the fire was more than sufficient to keep him warm. Like always, he kept his weapons close to him should he need them. It was the first time he lay down to sleep that he realized he was alone. Hrasa and Moonpaw, the only two beings in all of Middle Earth who gave a rat's arse about him, were both dead. Lying on the forest floor, Xurek

wondered for the first time what his purpose might be. The future he had hoped to have with Hrasa had died with her. The fact that he had avenged her was not much of a comfort. What future did he have now that she was gone? The other fact that Xurek was neither orc nor human made any prospect of a meaningful life impossible. The orcs had accepted his coexistence as if he were a stray dog, but the humans...what would they think of such a creature as him? Knowing the way humans feared orcs, he saw any future among his mother's people to be impossible. But, what of this boy? He was the first human he had met that did not instinctively fear him the way most humans did. Too tired to ponder the subject any longer, the half-orc gave a long drawn-out yawn before closing his eyes. Amid all the thoughts and emotions turning in his head, Xurek felt something that still remained. Where his hatred for his half-brother Korgak had been a roaring fire, it was mostly extinguished, but beneath the ashes, a smoldering coal lay in wait; its heat growing ever stronger, and its raging flame rekindling. This feeling of burning hatred, at first, made no sense to him. Korgak, the one he had despised his entire life, was dead. He had killed him. He had watched his head roll across the ground, and had eaten his flesh. It was then that he realized his buried hatred was not for Korgak. It was for his father, Golub.

Chapter 9

The sky darkened beyond the hills as the marching Black Blood Clan pitched their tents, the glow of their fires dotting the equally darkening plain like giant fireflies. The orcs had marched far, and were less than twelve days from reaching their destination. The four *Nazgul* had also stopped for the night. The black riders had led Golub and his clan to believe they had gone elsewhere, but they kept their eyes on them, ever watchful. There would be no fire for the *Nazgul*. In their suspended state between life and death, the burn of sun and fire, and the chill of ice and snow, made no difference to them. Long had they roamed Middle Earth remembering not the wetness of rain, the dryness of sunlight, or the taste of food and drink. One *Nazgul* stood taller than the rest, and even taller in the saddle. What his name was, he did not remember, nor did he remember the name of his companions. Even the Witch King, their unquestioned leader, did not remember his name. He was the eldest of the nine *Nazgul*, and the most knowledgeable, but recollection of their former lives were a blur in time. Sitting in the saddles of their black steeds, the four stared out over the plain.

“They believed you,” the *Nazgul* to the tall one’s right said in a whispery voice. “Believed what?” the tall *Nazgul* replied. “Lord Sauron gave no such orders to the Black Blood Clan; he gave the orders to us. It is luck that the Black Blood Clan marches on the Shire. Despite the falsity of your claim, they believed you. Do you not fear the dark lord will be most displeased at us for disobeying his orders?” “We have disobeyed no such orders,” the tall one retorted, this time with more force in his reply. “Lord Sauron gave

us orders to retrieve what was lost to him, but he did not specify how we do so.” The *Nazgul* to the left hissed in disagreement, “Why send them to attack the Shire? We could do it on our own. We do not need this rabble band of filthy orcs!” “It is precisely that sort of attitude that concerns me, from you and the dark lord!” the tall wraith replied. “You question the will of Sauron. That is treason!” the wraith in the center of the other two interjected. “Fools!” The tall *Nazgul*’s last statement was delivered with such ferocity that the other three went silent, none saying a word before he spoke again. “The Witch-King and Sauron both sell the strength of the halflings too short. Of all the long ages we have ridden this earth, are you so quick to forget the Battle of Fornost? Or the Battle of Greenfields? It was they who repelled the dark lord’s forces on both occasions! These creatures that dwell in the Shire are not to be underestimated. They appear docile, but if provoked, they can be just as lethal a force as an army of dwarves, elves, or men.” The other four *Nazgul* held their tongues as their taller companion continued to speak. “The art of war is to decide the battle before it begins. By allowing Golub and his horde of marauders to destroy these halflings now, we will assure that they will be of no concern. It will be one less enemy for us to deal with.” “What of the grey wizard? His fondness of the halflings has made him to grow suspicious,” said the *Nazgul* on the right. “He is preoccupied for now. At the moment, he does not know for certain that the ring of power lies within the Shire. The Witch-King will stall him. By the time the grey wizard discovers that the ring is the one ring, it will be too late. All the halflings will be destroyed, and the ring will be in our hands. With fortune favoring us, he will be dead before he can confirm his suspicions,” the tall *Nazgul* said. “Now that the Black Blood

Clan is on the march, the net is beginning to tighten. It has been nearly three-hundred years since the halflings engaged in combat. They have become comfortable, lazy, and fat in their homes; they will not be expecting an attack. Once the orcs arrive at the Shire, none will escape, none will survive. All our years of hunting will be over. Sauron will have his prize, and Middle Earth will be his.” “And if we should fail...,” said the *Nazgul* on the left, “...what then?” “We shall not fail,” the tall *Nazgul* replied. “None shall stand in our way, for there are none who can. All shall fall, like a wheat field in a hailstorm.” The last words of the tall *Nazgul* seemed to satisfy the other two. The plan of their taller counterpart seemed only logical, and favorable for the dark lord’s forthcoming plans. A moment of silence passed before another of the lesser *Nazgul* spoke again, a sudden thought coming to his mind, “The grey wizard is occupied, but what of white wizard? He is far more powerful than the grey one. The strength of Isengard alone will far outweigh any force the halflings can muster. If he has discovered the location of the ring, we may have already lost!” The tall wraith laughed a sinister cackle, the sound so disturbing that his horse shifted underneath him uneasily. The black phantom pulled on the reigns of his equally black steed, steadying him. “Believe me when I say, brethren, Isengard will be no trouble in the coming war.”

As if an answer to some unspoken prayer, two small black birds fluttered out of the air, one landing on the horn of the tall wraith’s saddle, and the other landing on his shoulder. They began to croak noisily. One of the other wraiths attempted to shoo the annoying pests away, but the tall *Nazgul* stopped him from doing so. These birds were no ordinary ravens or crows, these were crebain. The small carrion birds were as dark as

the wraiths, and like them, they melded into the night, becoming only shadows in the vast, black blanket that expanded the sky. They were the swiftest messengers of the dark lord, and some of his most useful spies. The tall *Nazgul* silenced them with his hand before speaking, “What word?” The little carrion birds began to croak and squawk once again. The sound was like rubbish to the common ear, but to the ear of the *Nazgul*, it was as clear as the common tongue of men. After the crebain had finished, the tall wraith ordered them to leave with a wave of his gauntleted hand, the little birds flying into the night sky and vanishing from vision. The tall *Nazgul* turned his horse and said to the others, “Come. He is waiting for us.”

Chapter 10

Five Days Later

Nearly five days after he escaped from the Black Blood Clan, Xurek's health had returned to him. The wounds he sustained would have taken months to heal for a human, but his orcish heritage had granted him a fast healing capability. Ever faithful, the boy had made good on his promise and brought the half-orc food and strong drink to help him recover his strength. The stream had kept Xurek's water skin filled, and the trips to and fro had helped him to strengthen his damaged muscles. For the first few days, he had to rely on his makeshift crutch, the pain being far too much for him to bear. Gradually, his dependence on the crutch became far less, and his dependence on his muscles more prevalent until he was able to divorce himself from it entirely. The first few days without his crutch, he was unable to walk without some difficulty. He had to hobble to gather water and firewood, and to relieve himself. Now, he was able to walk with little difficulty, but he had not yet attempted to run. He thought today would be the final day he would spend in the company of his human companion, for tomorrow he planned to leave for wherever the road would take him.

His health returning, Xurek did more active things besides gathering water and firewood. He set traps for rabbits, squirrels, and other small game. The woods were plentiful, for in a single day, he was able to kill several rabbits and a parcel of squirrels. He even caught a large trout from the stream. He gave most of them to Falks, but kept a rabbit and the fish for himself, informing his companion that he would not need him to

bring any more food or drink now that he could hunt for himself. He saw Falks regardless, for the boy hunted those parts of the woods. The half-orc taught Falks how to make simple traps for catching small game. Snares and deadfall traps were the easiest to make, but the more complicated contraptions such as spring traps and those used to catch fish and turtles were harder for Falks to master.

As the days passed, they spent their time talking and learning from one another. Xurek noticed that never once had the boy looked at him as if he were something other. They spent time hunting, trapping, eating, and talking, and it was like they were the best of friends. They were different, but in many ways the same. They had developed a trust, so much so that Xurek allowed Falks to hold his sword. He had taught him some of the basics when using such a weapon. The half-orc saw that the young human had the makings of a good warrior. He certainly had the heart to do so; all he needed was the training. Many times, the thought of training the boy did cross his mind, but how and when was another question. From the times they had talked, Xurek had learned that Falks had a family. He seriously doubted that the boy's parents would let him leave home, especially in the company of a half-orc who looked to be more monster than man. What life would Falks have here with his family? He'd grow up to be a farmer like his father, and a hater of goblinkind. Xurek's own experience with fathers told him that they were bound to disappoint. What an odd pair they would be, a half-orc and a human.

This day, Xurek had strung his bow for the first time in a good while and showed Falks how string it, as well as the proper form when using it. He had made some

makeshift arrows from a few saplings, which were unorthodox, but good enough for what they wanted to do.

Around eventide when the sun's rays began to fade, Xurek sat down with his human friend and shared a small meal of freshly caught rabbit, which the half-orc ate raw, and a mixture of freshly picked berries and nuts. Falks found Xurek's habit of eating raw meat disgusting, but he grew accustomed to it, and did not sneer when they ate their meal. Washing their meal down with some of the wine which the boy had taken from his home, the half-orc then drank some cool stream water from his skin. With the sun just beginning to set, he decided it was the best of time as any to tell Falks he would be leaving. "Falks," he said clearly. The boy turned his head to face him, a smile on his face as he swallowed a morsel of rabbit meat. "I...will be leaving tomorrow." Xurek had been able to practice his common tongue. Although still broken, his articulation had gotten much better. Falks' head dropped slightly, and his happy demeanor turned dimmer at hearing the news from his orcish friend. "Where will you go?" the boy asked chewing one last bit of his food. "I do not know," replied Xurek. An awkward silence fell. Neither looked at the other, fearing to break the silence. Regardless, Xurek knew that something needed to be said. "I do not know where I will go...I do not know what I will do...but I want to take you with me." Falks' face dashed towards the direction of Xurek's, his demeanor changing once again, this time to excitement. "I could teach you more than hunting. I can teach you the way of the sword...the way of warriors!" A smile began to grow on Falks' face, but for some reason he did not allow it to grow into fruition. "But...what about my father? And my mother? I can't leave them," he said.

Xurek scoffed and snorted loudly, “Bah! What future does your father offer you? Do you want to remain here, trapped like an animal in cage?” The boy did not acknowledge his words. “This farm...,” said Xurek, careful not to speak words in black speech, “...is not all of Middle Earth. There is much to see. The way you held my sword...and the way you wielded it...you have a warrior’s spirit!” Falks stared into the fire, his bottom lip opening and closing at random, struggling to find the words. When the boy held his tongue, Xurek continued to speak, “Wolves are not told where...or how... to live. They are free! You too can be free. All you need do is come with me. We will live and die by the sword. We will take what we want with no regards for the laws of humans!” Falks looked at his orcish friend, a mixture of nervous tension and genuine thrill manifesting on his face. His inner conflict began to resolve as he sat contemplating his future, a wide smile broadening on his face. His mouth opened, his answer ready to fall off the tip of his tongue, but he never got it out. “FALKS!”

A loud, angry cry echoed through the woods as Xurek turned to see a man standing not twenty paces from where he sat. He was big man, even taller than Xurek; a scruffy beard grew from his face. He was dressed in rugged peasant’s garb, but in his hand he held a pruning hook. By no means was a pruning hook a weapon, but in capable hands, it would kill as well any sword or spear. Xurek instinctively jumped to his feet, fearing what might happen as the man came running towards them. It did not take him long to realize this man was Falks’ father. “Get away from there!” the man bellowed angrily. Falks arose and ran to his father, keeping a distance between him and Xurek. The big man breathed a sigh of relief, and embraced his son tightly. “Are you alright?

Are you harmed?" he asked worriedly. "No, Da. I'm not hurt," Falks replied. "Thank goodness. Are you mad, boy? Do you know what that is?" Falks' father said pointing his pruning hook at Xurek. "He's my friend, Da," said Falks, confused. "'Friend'?! That's an orc!" his father replied angrily shoving the boy aside and brandishing the pruning hook in a threatening manner. Falks' countenance fell. By the look on his face, it was clear that he knew the word "orc", and now he looked at his former companion as if he had been betrayed.

The boy's father came towards Xurek, and the half-orc threw up his hands and said, "No! I mean no harm." The big man stopped in his tracks, surprised that he could understand his speech, although broken and gruff. The bearded bear of a man hesitated for a moment, his eyes widening. It seemed the fact that he could understand the grotesque being that stood before him only made him more fearful, and angrier. "I'll kill you, you ugly wretch!" he shouted. "No! Hear me, human. I did not harm the boy!" Xurek told him, desperate to avoid a fight, but the man would not hear him. "Shut up! Shut up! You filth!" With those last words the big man attacked. He swung the pruning hook like a sword, although sloppily. Foreseeing it coming, Xurek dodged out of the way, avoiding the swing. He had no time to relax, for after the first attack came a second, followed by another. "Stop!" shouted Xurek. "I am no orc!" and "I mean no harm!" It was no use, for the more he spoke, the angrier Falks' father became, and the more aggressively he attacked. The half-orc continued to dodge the man's attacks, not thinking of reaching for his sword for fear of making the situation worse. At the moment, he felt as if he were reliving the battle with his now dead half-brother when

they were younger; for like his half-brother, this human was just as ignorant and bullheaded, unwilling to listen to reason. Xurek was able to dodge a blow and slam his balled fist into the man's stomach. The hit had been true, for the big oaf doubled over, the air he breathed becoming his enemy as the pain welled up in his belly. While he was stunned, Xurek shouted, "I said stop! I am no orc! I am no man! I am nothing!" Without warning, the human recovered. Stinging pain crossed Xurek's face. Before he could take the time to assess it, the man came at him again, forcing the half-orc back. The man was not fully recovered from the blow he had taken, for he did not pursue Xurek as the half-orc moved out of the reach of his attack. Xurek watched as a heavy drop of black blood splattered on the dirt of the forest floor. He wiped his hand across his face, smearing blood onto his skin. He looked at the spattered patch of mud. The old feeling began to grow in him again. Feeling the sting of steel, and seeing his own blood, a spark kindled a flame in the half-orc's belly, and that flame began grow into a raging inferno. Xurek breathed through his fangs, hissing angrily. He looked up to see that Falks' father had recovered, and was now charging towards him, pruning hook in hand. Like lightning, Xurek's weapon emerged from its scabbard, the blackened blade of his short-sword connected with the inferior steel of the pruning hook. In what sounded like a cacophony of clanging steel, orcish snarls, human grunts, and curses, the attack ended as quickly as it had begun. The clamor ended with an all too human scream of agony. After a few lazy parries of the human's makeshift weapon, Xurek's sword found its way into the big man's belly, the blade slicing across his stomach and spilling his entrails into the dirt. What followed was more terrible than what had already occurred. The rage still flaring

with unquenched vigor, Xurek's sword began hacking, flinging red, sticky ribbons into the air. He kept up the attack although his enemy was already dead, his wrath refusing to be satisfied. The world went deaf to all but the half-orc's sword, but one single noise came cutting through the storm of bloodshed, "STOP!" Xurek suddenly realized the extent of his work. At his feet lay a red mass of what used to be Falks' father, unrecognizable after the work he had done. Xurek's body was covered in red blood. His breathing was heavy, and his body tense, his fist grasping the short-sword in an iron grip. His gaze drifted towards the source of the noise. There before him stood Falks, his human companion. The boy stood as still as a stone as he looked on at the mess that lay on the forest floor and the strange friend he had made in the passing days. Falks' eyes welled with tears, but he did not sob. Xurek's anger began to subside. The half-orc's sword fell from his hand. "Falks?" said Xurek calmly. Falks' body began to shake, and without a word, he turned and ran in the opposite direction. "Falks!" Xurek yelled after him, but the boy didn't answer, nor did he stop running. Quickly, Xurek snatched up his sword and bow, and took after him. "Falks, wait! Stop!" the half-orc called after the young human. The boy was nearly out of sight. On a normal day, Xurek could have outrun the young human with little effort, but since his leg was still on the edge of healing, his pace was slowed.

Xurek kept pursuing him even when he was out of sight, but he slowed his pace when he smelled smoke. He stopped and sniffed the air. He had not been mistaken. The smell he had picked up in the filthy breeze was indeed smoke. As he continued to follow Falks' trail, he could sense that the smoke was becoming heavier. By the amount of

smoke that clung to the air, it became clear to him that this was not the smell of a common campfire, but the smell of pillaging.

When Xurek finally broke through the tree-line of the forest, his suspicions were confirmed. Ahead, he could see a small, burning house that he suspected was Falks' home, the flames licking at the dusky sky. He heard screams which were soon verified by the sight of a woman, whom the half-orc assumed to be Falks' mother, being dragged by her hair by an orc while another tore at her dress. Several other orcs appeared, two of them man-handling Falks like a slave. Xurek froze as he took in the sight. He was not completely certain, but in the glow of the fire, he thought he saw the Black Blood Clan's identifying scar etched into the orcs' skin. One of the orcs spotted him and roared angrily, pointing his weapon at him. There was no use in running now. With his leg not fully healed, it would be a death chase. The half-orc was tired of running. Xurek had already drawn his sword, so he drew out his knife with his freehand. He did not wait for them to strike, but rather ran towards them, his hatred now channeled towards his enemies. Now it was time to test his mettle. It had been some time since his last fight, and now it was time to see if he still remembered the way of the sword.

The first orc who came at him was armed with a crude scimitar and an ugly blackened shield. Xurek parried away a strike only to be rammed with the shield, but he kept his footing. Delivering a strike of his own, Xurek's sword bit deeply into the wood, but he had to dodge a counterattack from his opponent, the sword's edge passing inches from his face. This was the opening he was looking for, for he ended his attacker's life with two quick stabs under the armpit before the body began to slump to the ground.

That's when he realized that the other four orcs had not joined their friend in the attack. Glancing upward, he saw that two of the orcs had strung their bows while the other two stood by, obviously not wanting to be hit by their projectiles. Quickly, Xurek jerked the body of the dead orc up against his own and two arrows buried themselves into the dead flesh. He left his knife in the dead orc's belly, and hoisted the corpse up with him as he ran towards his other four assailants, using his fallen enemy as a shield. As he ran, more arrows flew past him, but at least four others quilled the body before he was close enough to attack. The orc had dropped his scimitar when he died, but his shield was still strapped to his forearm. Xurek pulled the shield off and tossed the body aside, lobbing the shield at one of the archers. The shield hit the one on the left directly in his lower jaw, the rim of the shield hitting the orc archer in the mouth, cracking his teeth and breaking the bones of his jaw with a nasty *crunch!* Two skinny little goblins came at Xurek, one armed with an axe and the other with a handmade club fixed with iron spikes. They jumped in and out, taking less than well-placed swings with their weapons. The half-orc nicked one with his short-sword, a ghastly gash widening the goblin's smile all the way to his ear. They were more of an annoyance than a threat. An arrow planted itself into the back of one of the goblins. He let out a screech that sounded similar to a dog yelping when kicked. "Fool!" the goblin shouted back at the archer, "Watch where you're aiming that—" Before he could finish his sentence, Xurek's short-sword struck, cutting diagonally through the top of his opponent's head and exiting through his cheek bone. Goblins like these were stupid, and easily distracted. The other was so enamored with the death of his companion that Xurek stabbed him in the chest. The archer had

nocked another arrow by then, but before he could loosen it, the half-orc tossed his sword, the blade burying itself into the body of his foe.

His enemies dead, Xurek retrieved his weapons. Feeling the danger had passed, he sheathed his knife, but kept his sword in hand. He found the quivers of his foes to be nearly full, so he took one for himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Falks and his mother lying on the ground not far from where the fallen orc archers lay. There was no life in them. Falks and his mother's throats were slit from ear to ear. The orcs must have done it while he was busy fighting. Looking at their pale bodies lying lifeless on the ground, sorrow came over Xurek as he realized that the young human who had once been his friend was dead. Both of their eyes were still open, wide and frightened. It was the same look Xurek had noticed on Falks' face when the boy realized his friend's lineage was of the orcs. Where sorrow had once possessed the half-orc's mind, it soon turned to anger as the two corpses starred lifelessly up at him. Angry, he snorted loudly, and spat at the two dead humans. *That's right. Fear me, you little pink bags of flesh! Fear me forever!* He did not indulge his anger towards them for long before his attention turned to the orcs dead at his feet. He had not been imagining things, for when he examined the arm of one of the dead goblins, the mark of the Black Blood Clan was etched into the flesh of their upper arms. More anger flooded his body, and likewise filled his mind with hatred. The presence of these here meant that his father was not far off, and that thought made him angrier. The hatred he had been feeling since he fled the clan would not go away, not even the death of his half-brother could do that. Yet in his frustration and rage, he suddenly came to a realization. It was as clear as day now.

Where he would go and what he would do lay before him. Fate had now shifted in his favor. It was his father he wanted. No, not *father*, Golub. He could not rest nor move on while Golub still lived. Korgak had been bad, but Golub was worse. Golub's incessant pandering to his favorite son, the constant grooming to make sure he would be leader of the clan, and the unwavering hatred and displeasure of the son he called "bastard" made him twice the monster Korgak was. His half-brother had only been his instrument. Xurek now knew what he had to live for, and what he wanted to do. He wanted to kill Golub!

A loud *ting* interrupted the half-orc's thoughts. Xurek felt pain in his right hand, as if it had been jerked. He saw that his sword lay some six feet away from him, and an arrow not far from it. The next thing he knew, he was surrounded by twenty warriors, but they were not orcs. The one whom he suspected had shot his sword out of his hand turned out to be a tall female elf with long, golden hair. She was dressed in a green leather jerkin that matched the colors of the forest; a hood pulled over her head, and at her side hung a longsword. She had an arrow nocked and drawn which was directed at his head should he make a false move. With her came more warriors, dressed in similar garb and wearing light armor. They were all armed and ready, most of them humans, but one in particular was short, about half the size of a man. Xurek took him for a dwarf at first, but a closer look revealed that this creature was beardless, and his feet bare and furry. In his hand and resting on his shoulder was a club, but not the ugly makeshift things that goblins used. This one was fearsome and well-made; finely carved and polished wood ending in a metal collar at the head which was topped with a long sharp spike. What was even stranger was his scent. He had smelt human, elf, and even dwarf

before, but this one was completely foreign. He did bear the faint smell of a human, but it was heavily masked underneath something which the half-orc's nose did not recognize. The strange creature began to prod at the dead orcs with his weapon, making certain they were dead. He also looked over the dead humans, shaking his head when he saw their open throats. When he came to the orc that Xurek had struck with a shield, the little barefooted man-creature found him to be barely alive. "Eh! This one is still breathing," he said to no one in particular. The orc archer was in a bad way. The metal of the shield's rim had broken his jaw so badly that it hung from his head by one hinge. Most of the teeth in his top jaw had been knocked out or broken off, and his tongue lolled out of his head like slimy black worm. Judging by the eyes rolling about his head, Xurek guessed that he wasn't coherent. "Put him down, Hildigrim," said the elf female, her gaze never breaking from Xurek, nor her arrow wondering from his face. "Aye, Lady Aethel," and with that, the short little man that the elf called Hildigrim shoved the spike of his club into the heart of the injured orc. "What do we have here?" said Hildigrim, turning to Xurek and pointing his weapon at him. "We have a survivor," said the elf that Hildigrim called Aethel. "Survivor?" said the short man, as he picked up Xurek's sword. "Looks like this one killed the others." It was plain to see from the glow of the burning farmhouse that the blade was covered in black blood, and not the red blood of humans. "What?" said Aethel, her arrow not relaxing in the slightest. "It wasn't ours who put these down," he said showing the elf the sword. A man came forward. He was tall person, dressed similarly to the Aethel and Hildigrim. He had long, brown hair which was pulled back and tied to keep it out of his face. His face was gruff, sporting a full

beard, a healed scar crossing his right eye socket. The eye itself was white and capped over, rendering it blind. He carried a longbow in one hand, and an arming sword hung from his hip. "Master Lightfoot, where are the others?" asked the man. "Lord Kainarn," said the one called Hildigrim Lightfoot, saluting him. By the deference that the others showed him, Xurek suspected he was their commander. "All dead. This one did them in," said Aethel. Kainarn looked at Xurek, and Xurek stared back. Kainarn eyed the half-orc curiously. Xurek knew that his appearance was strikingly different from other orcs who lay dead. He asked, "You did this? Why?" Xurek, rather than answer, decided it best to play dumb and spoke to him the orcish black speech, "You are uglier than a one-eyed whore, and your mother was a fat swine!" By the looks on their faces, none of them understood a single word he said. Aethel sighed, "He doesn't speak common tongue. Orcs often argue and fight for the most stupid of reasons." "Figures," said Lord Kainarn. "Well, this one did our job for us," said Kainarn nodding at Xurek. "We best get back to camp." "What of this one?" said Hildigrim readying to strike with his club. "Take him with us. There is bound to be someone who understands black speech in our ranks. If not, we shall send for someone who does. What these orcs were doing this far west needs to be known. Take what you need from the dead, we need to move. If there was one orc party, there is bound to be more. Bury the boy and his mother," said Kainarn. Before Xurek could see what was going on, the short little man relaxed his iron club and took the half-orc's knife, bow, and quiver from him. The next thing he knew, Xurek was knocked to the ground, and several men man-handled him, binding his hands and feet. He fought as hard as he could, but with so many binding him at once, the prospect of

escape was impossible. Soon after, his world went black, but it was not from being knocked unconscious. Someone had put a sack over his head, and now he was being carried away. Where Xurek was going, he did not know, and how he would get away was an even greater mystery. He knew he had to get away. While Golub lived, he had to survive his captivity. The fact that orcs from the clan were so close proved that he was not far behind. But, how would he get away? And after he got away, how would he get to Golub when the chieftain commanded several hundred warriors? The half-orc had about half an hour to think of the answer to his problem, but before those who had been carrying him dropped him to the ground and removed the sack from his head, the answer came to him.

Chapter 11

When the sack was removed from his head, Xurek found himself sitting against a tree. The glow of several fires lay before him, and all around more humans wearing the same kind of garb were busy bustling about what appeared to be a large campsite. There were no tents he could see, and not everyone was walking on the ground. A few sat up in the trees. In between two particularly large trees was a rope bridge, and around the trees were thick, heavy wooden stakes nailed into the trunk, allowing one to walk around the tree and shimmy down ropes tied to the high branches. In the treetops, he saw large bundles of leaves supported by interwoven branches. On the ground, he noticed that there were sleeping quarters, but they were well-concealed because they were made of grass, reeds, sticks, and other natural elements. A few hammocks substituted for beds where the makeshift earthen tents couldn't be found. To the left, he saw a rope line tied horizontally between two trees where at least twenty horses were tethered, some saddled and some not. His assessment of the camp led Xurek to believe that this place was meant to be mobile. The majority of shelters and sleeping quarters these humans had created were made of materials that were of the forest itself, which meant that very little had to be carried with them. All could be easily disassembled in a moment's notice, leaving not a trace that anyone had been there. His eyes adjusted to the dim light of the fires, and the half-orc began to notice that a few of the people around the camp were elves, but there were none that were like the very short man with fury feet who called himself Hildigrim

Lightfoot. Seeing the group's priority for stealth, and their clothing which made them blend in easily with their surroundings, Xurek's thoughts drifted back to a time when the clan had trapped about dozen humans who had been spying on them. The word that he and Hrasa had learned that day was "ranger". From what they had learned of the humans after an extended amount of torture was they were men who lived their lives on the move, never staying in one place long before moving again. As best as he and other orcs in the clan could gather, rangers were spies of sorts, sent out to steal information, or to make preemptive strikes against goblinkind when they advanced into human territory.

Xurek began to listen to the conversations of those closest to him. He was unable to understand some things that were said because the words were foreign to him, but being able to see their gestures, faces, and the movement of their bodies allowed him to get the gist of what was being said. Most was small talk, questions about meal preparation, news from other parts of Middle Earth, and where the rangers would be scouting the next day. The half-orc continued to listen until his lupine yellow eyes came to rest on the elf who had held him at the point of her arrow. Aethel, the others called her. While she treaded through the camp, he heard her name called, "Aethel!" She stopped as the white-eyed human, who appeared to be the leader of the group, approached her. "Lord Kainarn," she said formally with a salute. Kainarn shook his head as if telling her not to call him that. "Your name has been drawn for the scouting tomorrow." "I know," she said, obviously perturbed. "You don't have to go. I can send someone else," Kainarn said, hoping she would consider his offer. "It's my time to go, Kainarn. I will not have others fight my battles for me." The white-eyed man gritted his

teeth under his full beard, “Aethel, I...,” His mouth began to tremble. “I don’t want you to go! We discovered orcs this far west for the first time in ages. The situation is much more dangerous than before. Please, don’t do this, for my sake if not your own.” Xurek noticed he spoke under his breath so that none could hear him save the elf. “I will be fine,” Aethel said, stroking the side of Kairnarn’s face and smiling. “Trust me to do my duty as you once did.” With a smile in turn, Kairnarn nodded his head and said, “Be careful,” before continuing on his way. Though he did not let it show in his face, Xurek smiled on the inside. Before he could think another thought, a sharp kick landed on his leg. “What you lookin’ at?” a man holding a spear said, looking down at the half-orc. In retort, Xurek said in black speech, “Human scum!” The man had no idea what his strange prisoner had said to him, but he became angry nonetheless. He raised the butt of his spear as if to strike the half-orc with it, “Wha’d you say, wretch!” “He can’t understand you,” said a female voice. Over the disgruntled man’s shoulder, Xurek saw Aethel. “There will be plenty of time for interrogation later,” she added. At hearing her sly, but all too clear, order, the man relaxed his spear and continued on his way. Xurek looked at Aethel, their eyes locking for a brief moment before she turned, a disgusted look on her face.

As the night wore on, nearly all the rangers had retired to sleep. While he had been listening, Xurek had managed to find where they had stashed his weapons. It was more reason to pay careful attention to Aethel’s sleeping quarters. Some of the rangers slept in the woven, basket-like structures that hung suspended from the trees. A handful of guards kept watch while the rest, about a twenty or more, slept. Lucky for Xurek, he

noticed that Aethel had made her bed on the ground. Two guards sat in the top of the trees armed with longbows, arrows nocked and ready, their attention focused in the opposite direction rather than anything going on in the camp. The other guards were armed with spears in hand. The very same guard that had threatened to hit Xurek with the butt end of his spear was on duty. *Perfect*, thought Xurek. The fire had died down enough so that the camp was much darker, and he felt that the time was right. Soon, the guard pacing opposite the one closest to him would feed the fire to build it up again. Seeing the man he had made friends with earlier, Xurek said softly under his breath in the common tongue, “Lug-headed ass...” The guard turned his head, eyeing the half-orc angrily, “Wha’?” Xurek looked at him with a smirk, showing his smaller fangs under his lips, and his lower canines. The guard huffed furiously as he paced over to where the half-orc sat. Xurek pulled his knees to his chest. “Wha’ you say?” the guard said again. Xurek’s smirk never wavered. The guard hit him across the face with the butt of his spear. Xurek shook off the strike, letting his smirk return. “Don’t give me that black speech nonsense! I know you said something in the common tongue. You may have fooled the others, but you haven’t fooled me!” Xurek rolled his eyes defiantly. The guard set his spear aside and knelt down only a few feet from the half-orc. “Speak, you filthy orc!” Xurek quietly spoke in the common tongue, “Lug. Headed. Ass!” The guard gasped, his mouth opening as if to say something. Before he could speak, Xurek’s legs shot up, locking around the guard’s neck. Immediately, Xurek tightened his limbs and threw the man aside. He managed to maneuver the guard’s neck in between his knees before giving a quick jerk, resulting in a *snap!* With time being of the essence, Xurek

moved his body until his wrists rested next to the dead guard's spear point. When he felt the steel, he began to rub his bonds against the blade until they were severed. He shuddered a little when he felt the sharpened edge nick his flesh, but did not cry out. His hands free, Xurek then used the same spear to cut the bonds on his feet. He could see that the guard who lit the fires was coming closer with a bundle of firewood in his arms. Taking a dagger from the guard's belt, the half-orc put the blade between his teeth and dragged the corpse out of sight. Now armed, he waited for the second guard to finish unloading the bundle of fagots before the half-orc crept behind him and slit his throat. Like the first guard, Xurek dragged the corpse out of sight then skulked over to where the two sentries kept a lookout, digging in his claws and crawling up a tree trunk like an insect. On the other side of the trunk, Xurek saw the first sentry overlooking the camp below. Across the swinging rope bridge was the other sentry. They were certainly within the line of sight of one other. There was no way he could kill one without alerting the other. He would have to do it quickly, and simultaneously. A plan formed in his mind as Xurek hugged his body close to the tree. Loud enough for the sentry to hear, Xurek pursed his lips together and let out a *Psst!* As he had hoped, the guard came around the tree, and Xurek met him halfway, shoving the blade of the dagger into his throat. With both hands free, Xurek was able to snatch up the bow with the arrow still nocked before the guard fell onto the bridge. The sentry could not scream due to six inches of steel buried in his neck. The ranger coughed as he choked on his own blood, alerting his companion before he died. Before the other sentry could retaliate, or alert the sleeping rangers below, Xurek loosed the arrow from the longbow, the pointed missile

embedding itself through the eye of the sentry, killing him instantly. With all guards and sentries dead, Xurek sneaked down the tree and back to the ground. He made his way to where the horses were tethered. Several of them gave soft whinnies when he approached, the smell of orc not sitting well in their nostrils. Xurek managed to calm them with gentle strokes and comforting hushes. They had evidently smelled orc before in battle and had become used to it, otherwise they would have made an endless ruckus. Xurek found a large chestnut charger that seemed to suit his fancy. The half-orc found a blanket and a saddle nearby, and quietly prepared the animal for departure. He then crept over to the area where he had seen the she-elf bed down for the night. She slept on a makeshift hammock made of canvass that hung suspended between two hearty saplings. *Even more perfect*, thought Xurek. A bundle lay underneath the hammock, and inside he found Aethel's weapons, and his own. He slung on his baldric which held his sword, attached the quiver of arrows to his belt, and placed his bow across his shoulder. Then, he took his knife and cut off a piece of the cloth that had covered his weapons and wadded it up. Xurek then put his knife to the elf's throat until it kissed her skin, drawing out a thin, red line. The elf awoke to see the half-orc's horrid face, and like the first guard he slew, she gasped in fear. Before she could say another word, the half-orc shoved the wad of cloth into her mouth. Any cries she made now would be muffled. "You say one word...make one peep...I cut off your pretty elf ears...then shove them into the red smile I'll cut into your throat," he whispered. Aethel looked completely shocked that the half-orc could speak common tongue. "You understand me?" he pressed her. She nodded frantically, *Yes!* Carefully, he folded the flaps of the cloth until it covered the she-elf completely. He

quickly spun the hammock until the exit hole tightened, and then gripping of the rope that held up the hammock in the front, he cut it. He did the same with the other end and used the severed ropes to tie up his prize. Xurek flung his prisoner over his shoulder, and made his way towards the horse he had saddled. Surprisingly, the elf was lighter than he had imagined, making carrying her easy. He laid her across the front of the horse's saddle, mounted, and cut the tethers which bound the horse. He gave the animal a slight kick, and the horse began to plod slowly out of the camp. When the horse hit a rather ruddy patch of ground, Aethel gave a loud protest. "Shut up!" he said under his breath, agitated at her noise, but she did not stop. Although she was gagged and her cries muffled, she still made an inconvenient racket. It did not take long before he heard someone shout, "To arms! He's escaped!" Aethel continued to make a ruckus. Now that Xurek's cover was exposed, he drove his heels into the stallion and charged out of the camp. Behind him he could hear the rangers scrambling for their weapons and mounts. Several arrows whizzed by his head, hitting trees and striking the ground. "After him! He has Aethel!" he heard a booming voice call out. Xurek had no doubt that it was the man called Kainarn.

Xurek rode on until he knew he had put some distance between himself and his pursuers. He made sure to leave plenty of tracks behind. Unlike most who escaped their captors, he wanted them to follow him, hence the reason why he had taken the elf. He needed a reason for them to pursue him. The she-elf squirmed from every so often, obviously uncomfortable lying across the front of the horse. He slammed a fist into her to keep her from doing so. Since the rangers were good trackers, they would be on his

trail sooner rather than later. Knowing the affection that the particular human showed towards his prisoner, Xurek also knew Kainarn would not rest until he rescued his little elf girl.

Xurek would not allow himself to stop. He kept pressing the horse, stopping every now and then to sniff the air. By scent alone, he managed to get back to the farmhouse where his father's warriors had killed Falks and his mother. On a horse, he was able to reach the place much faster than the rangers who had taken him by foot. The farmhouse had burned to smoldering ashes. Xurek was close to his father's clan. He had no idea from where the orcs had come from, but he knew that it wasn't the direction he had traveled. Therefore, he chose the opposite direction. Giving the horse another good kick, Xurek sped towards the tree-line behind the smoldering house. He stopped at one point. Sniffing the air, he could smell a scent identical to the orcs he had killed. Riding further ahead, he could smell the unmistakable scent of old urine where one of the orcs had taken a piss not a day earlier. He kept on, the scent of the clan growing stronger. He knew they were not far.

Xurek followed the scent for a few miles further. Breaking through the trees, he found the remnants of the clan's last campsite. It was only a few days old. Dead fires lay everywhere, and the earth was torn from where they had rested. The smell of old excrement and urine clung to the air. The trail they had left behind was obvious. He waited for a good measure of time, allowing his pursuers to catch up to him. It was a short wait, for he could see lit torches through the trees behind him. Breaking through the tree line, five rangers came through, followed by twenty, thirty, fifty more. Their

numbers ever increasing. There were many more than the half-orc had anticipated, but nearly all were mounted. In the camp, Xurek had only counted twenty horses; he had killed four of the rangers, which meant there had to be at least sixteen left. However, he had not considered until now that they may have had horses stored elsewhere, and likewise more warriors. It was a smart move. Dividing their forces and hiding them in strategic locations made them more difficult to discover. At seeing them, the half-orc cried out a wild, animalistic howl. To the forefront of the group was the white-eyed ranger mounted on a horse. With a look of disdain, the ranger drew out his weapon and shouted, "After him!" Turning his horse, Xurek bolted across the plains. Following the trail of Golub's warriors, Xurek looked back to see that three mounted rangers were following him, one of them Kainarn. Xurek needed them to follow, but not this close. Giving a snarl, the half-orc grabbed his bow and nocked an arrow. His bow being short made it perfect for mounted combat. Twisting in his saddle, the half-orc fired. The arrow hit one rider in the face between the nose and the cheekbone, the body falling dramatically out of its saddle. Hurriedly, Xurek nocked another arrow. He did not want to kill many of them, but he had to slow them down. Firing again, Xurek's second arrow struck the other rider in the shoulder, the ranger forcing his mount to slow down. Kainarn turned his attention to his fellow ranger, concerned that he may be fatally wounded. It was just the opportunity Xurek had been waiting for; for when the one-eyed man averted his attention, the half-orc sent an arrow which struck Kainarn's horse in the chest, piercing its heart. The horse fell headfirst into the dirt, flinging Kainarn forward.

Xurek could see the other wounded rider coming to his aid. For now, they had given up the chase.

Making his narrow escape, Xurek couldn't help but smile. It was working. All that he had planned was falling into place. His mount in full gallop, thoughts of victory, glory, and satisfaction surged through Xurek's mind. *I'm coming for you, father. I'm coming for your head!*

Chapter 12

Tired, and able to ride no more, Xurek had stopped for the night, but found little sleep as he had a prisoner with him and vengeful rangers on his trail. When he had found a suitable place to camp, he took Aethel down from his mount and untied the canvas that bound her. To his surprise, he found her body limp and unconscious. The prospect of binding her was proving to be easy, too easy. It was an assumption the half-orc soon came to regret. The she-elf's eyes flashed open. Just as Xurek had used his legs to take out the guard back in the ranger's camp, the she-elf was no stranger to utilizing her legs as weapons. As soon as her feet were free, she kicked Xurek square in the head, knocking him facedown into the dirt. The half-orc lay on the ground cursing. Aethel had seized his sword from his scabbard and raised the blade, but suddenly Xurek tripped her, lashing out with his legs. Before she could move to counterattack, Xurek kicked his sword away from her reach and proceeded to strike the she-elf repeatedly. The first kick landed on the side of her head, the second to her ribs. Another found her ribs once again, and a fourth her stomach. A fifth split her lip. Xurek then unsheathed his knife. Desperately, the elf clawed at the ground, attempting to stand. It was a vain prospect. Angry, Xurek grabbed Aethel by the heel of her right leg and slashed her upper leg below the buttocks. The she-elf screamed as the sharpened steel sliced into the flesh. Now, there was no hope of escaping. The half-orc had hamstrung her. With the muscle

cut, running would be impossible. Aethel began to sob miserably from both the pain and the knowledge that her escape was rendered impossible. It mattered not to Xurek. She continued to sob as he bound her hands behind her back before placing her under the trunk of a tall tree. Next, he searched her for weapons. He checked every possible place where as much as a knife, dagger, or needle could be hidden. He even removed her boots to make doubly sure. Aethel found his pawing disgusting. She closed her eyes when he touched her in places many would have considered unthinkable. He found nothing. Xurek walked away from her, but then he stopped in his tracks and turned back around. Aethel looked at him with the most venomous of stares as he crouched at eye level with her. With his left hand, the half-orc reached down the elf's trousers and into the area between her legs. Her eyes went wide as she felt his hand on her lower parts, more surprised than disgusted he would do such a thing. It took him a moment, but soon Xurek stopped his investigation. Using his other hand, the half-orc reached for his knife, and his second hand went down her trousers. Aethel's eyes went from surprised to terrified, fearing what the vile creature would do next. In one quick snip, Xurek removed both his hands. In one hand was his knife, and in the other was a leather strap attached to a sheath holding a small dagger. The dagger had been well-concealed, as it had been strapped to Aethel's inner right thigh.

Satisfied he had disarmed his prisoner, Xurek spared what water he could for the horse and made himself a bed of dead leaves on the ground. There would be no fire this night in order to make sure they went unnoticed. He knew the rangers would have to stop after some time. With lack of sleep and tired horses, they would not be able to keep

up with him. The clear and present signs that there were many other orcs would make them far more cautious. Xurek purposefully kept himself and Aethel at the closest distance to their pursuers as he dared.

Bedding down for the night, the she-elf piped up. “He will find you, orc.” Xurek turned his face towards her as he lay on the ground. His eyes caught the moonlight, making them glow with yellow fire, and making his face appear like some ravenous wolf peering through the darkness. Unlike many others who had seen his eyes before, Aethel seemed unafraid of him. “I am counting on it,” he replied slowly to make sure his words were correct. It seemed that she understood him well enough, for Aethel looked worried when she heard his retort. “You do not frighten me. I’ve faced orcs far more terrifying than you.” Her words were becoming bolder, but the underlying sobs in her words took the sting out of them. Xurek sat up straight, his anger showing. “That’s because I’m not an orc. Only half,” he said. The she-elf looked perplexed. “My father is orc, my mother was human. Mix those two, and here I am.” “A half-orc?” Aethel said quietly. Now that she knew the truth, she stared at him as if examining every detail. Where she had been bold in her broken state before an enemy she thought she knew, the elf’s demeanor changed dramatically. The creature who had taken her was something much more terrifying, and much more abominable than she could have imagined. She said nothing else the entire night.

The elf finally asleep, Xurek came to the realization that not only did he share kinship with both man and orc, but also with Aethel. As he and other young orcs in the Black Blood Clan had been told from the time they were old enough to speak, the first

orcs had been fashioned from elves with the use of Morgoth's sorcery. Aethel was the first elf he had been able to see up close without the intent of killing...yet. Seeing her short pointed ears, milky white skin, emerald green eyes, and perfectly proportioned body, he could not comprehend how he shared kinship with elves; much less how full-blooded orcs' lineage emerged from creatures like Aethel. He could see how Hrasa had borne some resemblance. Take away her fangs, claws, tar black skin, and yellow eyes, and she very well could have passed for an elf. These thoughts were beginning to make Xurek feel even more like a conglomerate of a perverted lineage. He was something that should not be, a creature possessing the blood of orc, man, and elf. A living abomination of what should never be. Shaking his head at the strange feeling that came over him, Xurek then retired both his body and thoughts for the night.

Due to a restless night, Xurek was up and ready before the sun rose in the morning sky. By the looks of Aethel, she had slept the whole night through, even while being bound in an uncomfortable position. He saddled the horse first, and then downed a good mouthful of water before giving some to his prisoner. At first, she was reluctant to drink, fearing it might be poisoned. But when she tasted it, she drank gladly. Xurek then flung his prisoner on the saddle of his horse and set off after the Black Blood Clan.

They galloped only for a few miles before Xurek dismounted, stuck his knife into the ground, and began to listen. He could hear hoof beats echoing. He knew the rangers were not far behind. With any luck, they would be on his trail within the hour. The half-orc pushed the chestnut stallion as fast as he could. The horse left huge prints behind, his hooves ripping out chunks of soft earth.

They rode on for what seemed like three hours, Xurek dismounting occasionally to listen for the sound of their pursuers. Having a sturdy mount made gaining ground faster than any advancing army. It was also easier to catch prey that didn't know it was being pursued. Once he was satisfied, they moved on. The scent of the Black Blood Clan began to grow stronger on the breeze, making the half-orc thankful that he was downwind. At one point, Xurek stopped the horse completely and sniffed the air several times. The scent was stronger now, much stronger. By the look of the sun, it was beginning to grow late in the day. There would be less than two hours of sunlight left. By then, he hoped the rangers would catch up to them, for they had traveled farther than he had expected. By his estimation, the rangers would be more than an hour behind them if they rode at a steady pace. Until they arrived, he needed to locate the clan. By the strength of their scent, he knew they had to be close. Very close. "What are you doing?" asked Aethel. "Shut up!" he replied irritably. Xurek noticed that the closest tree cover was to the left, but on the ridge over the hill, there was a thick line of trees. If he were his father, Xurek knew that's where he would hide the clan for the night. Riding up the ridge, Xurek dismounted and pulled the horse along with him, allowing Aethel to sit upright in the saddle. When they neared the top of the hill, the half-orc gestured for his elvish captive to be quiet. Carefully easing his way towards the edge of the hill, Xurek saw what he had been expecting to see. Below, Golub's Black Blood Clan made camp for the night, around three-hundred warriors. It took him some time to pick out Golub from the others. His orcish eyes were keen, for he found him sitting by the fire drinking back a large skin of orcish liquor. His heart leapt with unparalleled glee. It was like

Xurek had finally found someone who had been lost to him for ages, but the embrace he planned to give his father was one which would be most unwelcome. Xurek was pleased to see that they were bedding down for the night. With any luck, the rangers would be here very soon.

Biding his time, Xurek sat on the ground chewing on a fat pigeon he had shot and plucked. It had been some time since he had eaten a proper meal, so the nourishment was welcome. Aethel lay on the ground not far from the horse. Rather than sit upright, the she-elf lay on the ground, shivering from the chilled wind. He thought of giving her a piece of his pigeon, but with no fire to cook the meat, he doubted it was proper food for an elf. The half-orc crunched down the last bit of bird flesh and bone, drank down the last of his water, and then went straight for the wine that remained in the jug which Falks had given him. His meal finished, Xurek unsheathed all of his weapons and gave them one last inspection. He made sure all of them were clean. Taking a whetstone from one of his pockets, he began to sharpen his knife until it was like a razor. Likewise, he sharpened his short-sword, the black sheen of the blade glimmering in the moonlight. The sword was one of his only friends left in all of Middle Earth now, the only one he could rely on. Next, he inspected his arrows, checking each one for imperfections that could cost him his life during the forthcoming slaughter. Each head was perfectly intact, thirty-two to spend in all. Finally, the half-orc inspected his bow. It was as fine as the day he had made it. The weapon made him a master on the battlefield. He drew back the string, feeling its bend and its weight. It had been as equally good a friend as his sword and knife. Now that he was about to face the most dangerous task of his life, Xurek

knew if he were die, he would go the way he wanted: in combat with his friends at his side. This was his final revelation: he was one bastard against two armies.

Surely as the sun rises, he could hear the distant sound of hoof beats. Orcs rarely, if ever, rode horses, therefore he knew it had to be the rangers. Peeking through the trees, he could see the light of torches on the plain. It was them without doubt. After snatching up his weapons, Xurek grabbed Aethel and put her back in the saddle before mounting the horse behind her.

Xurek's heart began to pound. The rhythm of his pulse sounded like a war drum echoing in his ears. When they finally came into sight, he could see that their force was far greater than he had imagined. By his own estimation, there were at least a hundred rangers, all mounted. Xurek took a deep breath at seeing the horses trotting ever closer. It was time.

Turning his horse, the half-orc spurred the chestnut stallion up the hill. By now the sky had fully darkened. This night the moon was full, as full as it had been the night Xurek and his clan had raided the farm; the same place where he spared the little human. Xurek often wondered if he had done as was expected of him and killed the little girl if things would have been different. Would he be where he was now? Would Hrasa and Moonpaw still be alive? Would Korgak have given him at least some small measure of respect, and likewise not have died? He shook all such thoughts from his head. "What ifs" mattered not now, for as the rangers came closer to the edge of the ridge, his troubling questions died with a question that devoured the others: what if his father had killed him the moment he was born?

Breaking over the hill, the campfire lit up the area sparsely, but the full moon provided greater visibility. This night, the earth would drink up much blood of both man and orc. On the ridge, Xurek stopped the horse and jerked on the reins, the big chestnut animal rearing into the air and giving out a loud whiny. The noise in the camp fell silent, all attention focused on the half-orc. Taking an arrow from his quiver, the half-orc drew back the string of his bow and fired. The shot was not random, but purposefully aimed, for the arrow impaled the chest of an orc who sat next to Golub at his fire. The orc chieftain stood up, his eyes gazing into the darkness at the mounted figure. Knowing he had his sire's attention, Xurek shouted, "Father, it is a good day to die!" It was as much a suggestion as a threat. "It's the bastard. Kill him!" he heard Golub shout. With the words of their leader still fresh, the fury of the Black Blood Clan was unleashed. Xurek did not wait around long for them to come after him. For the most part, the clan was composed of infantry, but a few of them were mounted on wargs and could give chase faster than those on foot. The horse, smelling the massive stench of orc, did not need much persuasion to run. Behind him, Xurek could hear the thunder of orcish feet chasing after him. Breaking through the thin tree-line, the half-orc rode on. The she-elf who lay bound across the front of his saddle turned and vomited as she was jostled and tossed like a sack of vegetables. Ahead of him, Xurek could see the mounted rangers, and just as he suspected, the white-eyed man was at the forefront. Xurek did not slow his pace at the sight of the hundred armed rangers, but charged headlong, taking out five arrows which he clinched in his bow hand. It did not take Kainarn long to recognize the stolen chestnut horse, and the monster who had taken his lover. Drawing out his sword, he shouted,

“Charge!” and the mounted warriors bolted forward. Xurek’s plan was working. Half the distance to them, Xurek realized the madness of his choice. He pulled the reigns of his charger, the horse digging its massive hooves into the dirt. In front of him, the rangers were coming for his head, and behind him, the Black Blood Clan was closing in.

The rangers had now gained fifty yards of ground, leaving only one-hundred yards between Xurek and certain death, but suddenly the rangers slowed their pace. Turning his horse, he could see that Golub’s Black Blood Clan had come into view, charging down the hill and onto the plain. For the first time, the two armies could see each other, both perplexed that they should find themselves on the field of battle this very night. Their shock did not last long, for as soon as both armies realized what they were facing, their strange fascination turned to the attack. Xurek smiled as he locked eyes with his father. Golub was dumbfounded to have been goaded into a fight with an enemy he did not know existed. Xurek was even happier when Golub began to rile up his warriors. Whipping them in a horrid frenzy, the mass of orcs and goblins roared, snarled, and howled, cursing their foes for cowards and weaklings. They were not backing down from this fight. Looking back at the rangers, Xurek could see they were panicking. They were outmatched in number, and ill-equipped for pitched battle. Several of the warriors who sat next to Kainarn repeated what seemed like an endless onslaught of questions as to what his orders were. The half-blinded ranger did not have an answer. Seeing that all the rangers to his front were mounted, Xurek feared that they would run, and all his effort would be in vain. A handful might fall to the clan’s archers and the few warg-mounted warriors, but their horses would outrun the clan with ease. They had lost

their spirit, but Xurek was determined that they would not lose their hearts. Snatching the she-elf by her long yellow hair, the half-orc jerked Aethel upright so that she faced the rangers. Aethel shrieked in protest as the half-orc pulled her hair. Xurek held her in place until he was sure that Kainarn saw her. Xurek then turned his mount back towards the Black Blood Clan. He came as close as he dared, and with one heavy throw, he tossed the she-elf to the ground not ten yards from the nearest orcs. As they had before when Xurek gave them the beheaded corpse of his half-brother, his fellow orcs swarmed onto the elf like bees on honey, only this time they had a fresh, live elf. The she-elf's screams broke through the night as the clan began to eat her alive, rending her flesh and tearing her apart piece by piece, starting with her arms, and then moving on to her legs. They had done as Xurek had hoped. Her screams were so piercing loud that they rose even above the furious howls of the mob of angry orcs. Aethel screamed until her vocal cords tore, and her cries of agony became hoarse croaks. It didn't last long, for her head was soon torn from her body. The whole ordeal had happened so fast that it was almost a blur. Seeing the look on Kainarn's face now, Xurek knew the white-eyed commander's decision was made. Throwing reason and rationality to the wind, the fool lord sounded the charge. The battle was on.

Within a matter of seconds, the two armies charged. To his left, Xurek could see an army of mounted rangers, and to his right the murderous Black Blood Clan on foot. His plan had worked, but now that he stood between them, the half-orc felt that he had made a grave error. No matter what side he ran to, enemies surrounded him on all sides. He had not one ally in this fight. Thinking quickly, Xurek deduced that the cavalry

would be more difficult to push through. Nearly all of Golub's warriors were on foot, so he decided to take his chances with them. Kicking the big chestnut stallion, the horse bolted towards the horde of orcs. Drawing his bow, Xurek began to fire, the arrows plunging into the bodies of those who had once been his brethren in arms. After he spent the first five arrows, the half-orc reached for five more. Five orcs lay dead, but his path was still congested. Carefully, he took his shots and felled five more warriors of the Black Blood Clan. Twenty-one arrows left. Some of the orcs had gotten the right idea and moved out of the half-orc's way, not wanting to get quilled with arrows or trampled by hooves. Some were not as fortunate. Drawing out his sword, Xurek pushed his mount onward, driving his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal knocked many of them out of the way and trampled them underfoot. Those who came too close to his horse, or himself, Xurek cut down with his blade. Few orcs turned around to chase after him, but the ones who did, he shot. Utilizing his bow again, he killed four more. Seventeen arrows.

The battle raged on for nearly three hours. At first the mounted army of rangers had the definite advantage as Xurek had predicted. With their horses, they were able to ride down their foes and make use of the long reach their mounts provided. The rangers had weapons of better quality than the Black Blood Clan, but the rangers were also ill-equipped for open and pitched battle. They were lacking armor piercing weapons like maces, pikes, and halberds.

What the Black Blood Clan lacked in mounts, it made up for in numbers. Where one orc fell, two more took his place. Although their armor was rusted and ill kept in

many respects, many orcs possessed plate armor. Swords were present among the orcs, but so too were maces, hammers, and battleaxes. The meager defenses of the ranger's armor could not withstand blows from such weapons.

Xurek rode his horse throughout the carnage, taking well-placed shots at both men and orcs. He spent every arrow that remained in his quiver, save for one which he held back. Afterward, he moved on to his sword. The half-orc's horse gave him an edge over those on the ground, and made him equal to those who were mounted. Xurek realized that this was not a battle between two armies, but three. He realized he was a one-warrior army. The half-orc laughed to himself as he thought that someone might name this conflict the Battle of Three Armies.

Soon, the battle began to slow down. To his disappointment, Xurek saw the number of rangers diminishing. The bodies of both man and orc littered the grassy ground, but now the numbers of the Black Blood Clan outnumbered the remaining rangers twice over. Golub had been smart, for he had devised a plan which kept the humans from escaping. Xurek sat in his saddle from a safe distance as he watched the battle end.

Golub barked orders to those who remained in his clan to hold the line. All of them wanted a piece of the few enemies that remained. The rangers had destroyed more than half of the clan's forces, leaving around one-hundred warriors. They had surrounded the remaining rangers, about twenty left with nowhere to run, orcish killers surrounding them on all sides and closing in. One by one they fell. The humans whose horses had died in the battle were picked off with arrows or javelins, ran through with a

swords or spears, or bludgeoned to death. Other rangers were unfortunate enough to get too close to the orcs surrounding them, and were ripped apart like insects in the hands of a child. In the end, the last man standing was Kainarn, the half-blinded lord and Aethel's lover. He was without his mount, and wounded in several places. He swung his sword pathetically at those who came too close, managing to kill one or two orcs in the process. The victorious orcs began to jeer, insult, and curse him as he fought for his life. Shoving his way through the crowd, Golub stepped into the circle, clenching the haft of his bloody flail in his right hand. He growled and bared his fangs, smiting his chest in challenge. Kainarn gritted his teeth, and without hesitation, charged forward, his sword upraised. He only took two steps before an arrow shot him in the forehead. The once proud lord fell to the ground as stiff as stone, the orcs making a great ruckus as they laughed, finding the farce to be mightily humorous. The result of the battle had gone differently than Xurek had predicted. The half-orc knew that he could not fight over one-hundred orcs, even if they were exhausted from combat, and that was the reason why he kept his last arrow.

The remaining orcs' laughter continued until Xurek cried out in a loud voice, a roar so angry and full of rage that it silenced all sounds of rejoicing. All eyes turned towards him, glowing in the moonlight. "Father!" the half-orc shouted clearly for all to hear. As he had before, Golub, Xurek's sire, came wading through the bodies of his inferiors. "Xurek!" the big orc acknowledged him. It was the first time in a long time Golub had called him by his name. For the half-orc, hearing his father speak his name

was strangely the sweetest thing he had ever heard. If he had any power to do so, Xurek would make sure it was the last word he would ever say.

Xurek growled angrily, showing his fangs as he did so, projecting all the years of hatred and bitterness that had hibernated within his blood. In response, Golub let out a loud bellow of his own. With that, the half-orc dug his heels into his horse and charged. Golub did not call for a warg to mount, nor did he show any sign that he wanted one. The orc chieftain ran forward with flail in hand which he began to swing, the spiked ball gaining momentum with every step he took. The other orcs never moved from where they stood, as if they understood what was happening. At seeing his sire coming towards him, Xurek's thoughts drifted to his past fights with his elder half-brother. In almost every way, Golub resembled Korgak except that both his ears were whole, and his head was as bald as an onion. This time, it would be different. Xurek reached for the last arrow in his quiver and nocked it. He pulled back the string, feeling the wood of his bow bend and the string tighten. The half-orc took a deep breath and held it, his eyes staring down the shaft of his arrow, the point locked on to the black heart of his target. He held his shot until he was too close to miss. He had his target locked. At this range, there would be no dodging the deadly missile. Calmly, Xurek released the arrow, but as he did, the horse simultaneously lost its footing and tumbled to the ground. The arrow he had fired sailed towards Golub, but it barely missed him, the sharp point going past his head but slashing his brow. Xurek tumbled to the ground along with his horse. His body ached all over from the fall, but nothing was broken. Pressing through the pain, the half-orc jumped to his feet, for he knew he had no time to remain idle. He could see that one

of his father's warriors had put an arrow between his mount's eyes. The lowlife orc had robbed Xurek of his kill, but who had done it did not matter, for his father was still barreling towards him, flail in hand. Vengeance was not all lost. To his left, Xurek found a shield on the ground and snatched it up. It was round shield, about forty inches in diameter, made of wood reinforced with steel plates, a center grip on the back. It would help to level the playing field against Golub's flail. At his side, Golub had a sword, but with any luck, he would not get the chance to use it. Ready as he would ever be, Xurek charged forward and met his enemy midway. Unexpectedly, Golub ceased his charge, and gripping his weapon with both hands, he swung it with all his might. The spiked ball came hurtling towards Xurek, but he defended with his shield, the strike glancing off. Golub returned with a second strike, his weapon colliding with Xurek's shield again. In a flash, Golub unsheathed his sword. Xurek parried a thrust with his short-sword, and then counterattacked with a hit from his shield, the rim punching Golub in the jaw. The big orc stumbled back, spitting out a tooth and mouthful of tar black blood. Xurek did not capitalize on the moment, but allowed his enemy to fight on, wanting to relish this duel for as long as it might go on. Golub came again, several swings of his spiked flail passing over the half-orc who ducked under the attack. A fourth glanced off of Xurek's shield, but a fifth landed hard. The very end of the chain hit the rim of Xurek's shield, causing the ball to whip over the top. Two of the spikes drove themselves into the half-orc's flesh. Xurek growled in pain as his father pulled the weapon away and came at him with his own sword. The pain only made the half-orc fight harder, for Xurek came at Golub again, ducking under the swing of his father's sword, colliding into him with the

shield. At close quarters, Golub was unable to use his flail and longsword, his stronger attacks rendered useless. Xurek's short-sword forced the bigger orc to back away so that he could defend himself. They exchanged blow for blow. Xurek managed to cut Golub under his ribs, leaving a nasty slash wound, but the chieftain never relented. Golub attacked like an angry bear until he parried a cut from his son's weapon. Using his flail, he entangled the half-orc's short-sword with the chain. Golub then proceeded to pummel his son's shield with his longsword as if it were a club. To Xurek's surprise, the most intense pain he had ever felt washed over his body, causing both his arms to go limp, dropping his guard. His father had reversed his sword's blade and stabbed him in the thigh, the steel biting into the bone. It was soon replaced with new pain, for Golub let go of his weapons, picked up a spear from the ground, and drove it into his bastard's belly just below the breastbone. The half-orc starred at his sire, forcing his face into angry scowl despite the excruciating agony that now enveloped him. Golub stared back, his teeth bared in a wicked smile. Determined to rob him of his very soul, Golub hoisted Xurek into the air by the spear. The half-orc screamed out in pain as his body slid further onto the shaft. In reaction, Xurek grabbed the wooden shaft to keep himself from being impaled. Golub laughed menacingly as he saw that he now had his son gigged like a fish. Golub's strength was incredible, for he lifted him with only one arm. Where Korgak had been strong, Golub outclassed him in every way conceivable.

It was over. All was truly lost. Xurek had come this far only to fail. Hanging on the spear, the half-orc stared up at the sky. The stars and the moon were so very bright this night. For that moment, it felt as if the smell of death and damnation had faded from

existence. It was a truly beautiful sight. The beauty of the night sky immediately drew him to memories of Hrasa and his canine friend, Moonpaw. Death was not so bad. It was peaceful, not unlike sleep, for now he felt it washing over the pain that had overtaken him earlier, calling him to her bosom like the loving mother he never knew, and never would know.

In one quick motion, Xurek let go of the shaft that stabbed into his midsection and his body slid downward, the point exiting his back and impaling him. Golub's face was inches from Xurek's own, and even closer when he reached his arm around his father's back and pulled him close. The half-orc's other hand reached behind his belt, and drawing out his knife, he drove it straight down into the flesh between Golub's neck and collarbone. It was the closest thing to an embrace he had every received from the orc who was his father. The big orc's knees buckled as death began to overtake him. "You...you...", he managed to say, his breath heavy with the spray of blood as he spoke. Xurek's face scowled again, but this time it was a look of both hatred and loss. The half-orc's eyes began to leak tears like that of a human or elf, another reminder of his heritage. "You bast...", said Golub as he fell to his side and began to cough excessively, blood gushing up from his throat. Acting on instinct, Golub pulled the knife free and tossed it aside. Blood poured forth from the wound, turning the grass where he lay as black as the sky. His life pouring rapidly out of him, Golub breathed his last, and died. Xurek sat on his knees, the spear impaling his body. The pain had become so great that his body could process it no further. All was numb.

Astonished at what had transpired before their very eyes, the remaining orcs of the Black Blood Clan moved slowly forward, grunting in silent whispers. They stopped and investigated the body of their once proud leader, but when they were satisfied that he was dead, their attention went to Xurek. They stared at him as if they were waiting for something. It was then, in his final moments, that Xurek remembered that he was now chieftain of the Black Blood Clan. He had dethroned his father and his heir. In his dying moments, he began to laugh at the irony of it all, but his chortles turned to bloody coughs as pain shot from his torso to his chest. All around him stood the orcs who only moments ago had been undyingly loyal to Golub, now under his command. In his last moments, the half-orc spoke, "I, Xurek, chieftain of the Black Blood Clan give you all this one command. There will be no grave, nor vigil, for Golub son of Grak. Nor will there be any monument for Xurek his bastard son. We will rot in the sun along with others who lay here, and our bones and flesh will be picked clean by the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air." The orcs all understood him perfectly. Unable to hold himself up any further, Xurek slumped onto his side, his strength all but gone. Where the orcs had been astonished before, they began to panic after hearing Xurek's first and final order. A big burley orc with arms as big around as his legs spoke, "I assert myself as chieftain and unquestioned leader of the Black Blood Clan!" Another responded in turn, "No you won't you ugly sheep shagger! I shall be leader!" Soon after, virtually all the orcs began to place their bid for leadership. What started with an argument soon became a shouting match. The shouting match became a shoving contest. The shoving contest became a fist fight. The fist fight then came to steel.

As he lay on the ground, the carnage continued around Xurek. The remaining hundred, or so, orcs that had survived the battle had begun to fight amongst themselves. Orc died on the sword orc, but Xurek heard none of it. While the light began to fade slowly from his eyes, the half-orc looked up at the sky once more, the brilliance of the night filling him with a joy he had never felt before. *It is a beautiful night for vengeance, and vengeance is mine*, he thought, all notions of Hrasa and Moonpaw absent from his mind. He blinked his eyes once, and the sky grew darker. A second blink brought only more darkness. The last thing he saw were two tiny black birds flying high above his head, cawing into the night. Soon enough, the carrion birds would be there clean up the aftermath of the battlefield, and all would be forgotten by Middle Earth. Yes, even he would be forgotten. Nothing, but a moment in time. With that, Xurek, the bastard half-orc offspring of Golub, died

Epilogue

High in the mystic tower of Orthanc, all fell quiet around Isengard. The tall, black stone tower had been erected thousands of years ago, and it was here that the Maiar, in their subtle human forms, had founded the White Council. Their council consisted of the two blue wizards, the grey, the brown, and the most powerful of all, Saruman, the white. On a normal day, the brooks would be babbling, and the groves bustling with all sorts of animals calling to one other and feasting on the succulent fruit. Even at night the sound of hundreds of crickets, frogs, owls, and wolves could be heard singing at the moon while thousands of fireflies lit up their tiny lanterns. But this night was not a normal night. All was quiet. Not one sound from any animal could be heard; even the fireflies made themselves scarce. For the first time in many hundreds of years, a dark presence had fallen over the Maiars' towers.

The meeting between them and the white wizard had been uneasily arranged. Both parties were reluctant to do so, as both expected some sort of trap or foul play. Very few things in Middle Earth rivaled the *Nazgul*, but even they feared the power of the white wizard who called himself Saruman. The visage of an old, decrepit man was very deceiving. The being that sat before them was powerful enough to kill them all easily, even the Witch King was frightened by him. Five of the nine *Nazgul* had come, and so far, everything was going as planned. However, a lucid uneasiness still clung to the air in the room. All were armed as a precaution, the wraiths with their swords and knives, and the wizard with his staff. They had talked long into the night, their meeting

diverted from the eyes of both the grey wizard and of Sauron, and now they were beginning to reach an agreement. "Lord Sauron will be most grateful for your aid. As you know, Isengard is a most strategic location," the Witch King said. He was a head taller than all the others, and most intimidating. Saruman leaned forward in his throne-like chair, his staff resting in the crook of his arm, and reached over to the table where a goblet of wine sat. He took it in his left hand and drank a healthy swallow before he pointed a boney finger at the tall wraith who spoke for the others. "Do I have your word that Isengard will receive the protection of Mordor? By gaining Sauron as an ally, I gain many enemies in turn." The Witch King hissed, feeling slightly insulted. "Mordor's aid will be given to you, and a place at the dark lord's side secured if you submit to his will. You will be pleased to know that victory is now certain, for the ring of power which you, and we, have been searching for has been found." Now the white wizard listened closely, his attention perked and focused. "My lieutenant can assure you of this", the tallest of the black phantoms said, signaling the wraith a head shorter than he to speak. "'Tis true," hissed the second one. "Even now the ring is within our grasp. An army of orcs marches on the Shire, the place where the ring has been hiding for over sixty years!" "The Shire?" replied Saruman rather surprised. "Oh, yes. Your companion, the grey wizard, has only begun to suspect that one of the halflings has been carrying this weapon of great power, but he has yet to confirm it." "Gandalf is often preoccupied with many such trivial matters. How can you be so sure he suspects the ring to be in the Shire?" Saruman asked. "We have many spies in many places," said the second tallest *Nazgul*. "Even here in Isengard, I presume?" the white wizard said with a threatening smile. All

the *Nazgul* fell silent, the realization that the Saruman knew of their activities frightened them. Saruman was no stranger to the dark lord's spies. Since the day Isengard was established, he and the other wizards had created spells which warded off spies, be they flesh or spirit. Ever since he began his quest to locate the ring, Saruman had slowly begun to disenchant the warding spells which had guarded Isengard for millennia. At first, he had hoped to find useful information from Sauron's spies. He had even captured several whom he interrogated, but just as it seemed that he was going to make progress, the spies suddenly died despite being given sufficient care. When the wraiths held their tongues, Saruman continued, "Tell your master than I accept his offer. I will raise his army as soon as I have the means to do so." "You have the means," said the Witch King, "We have provided you with men, Black Uruks, and orcs necessary to create a new breed of soldier." "You call that base group of degenerates you delivered to me the best your master has to offer? I have the power to create a new breed of Uruk-hai, but the soldiers Lord Sauron seeks will not come of those wretches. They are too inbred, too sterile, and too deformed to create the quality of warriors Sauron wants. The monstrosities I have created are useful, but in the way a lame dog is useful. You might as well send an army of sheep to war before sending them. Their intelligence would be superior to the *things* that I have created. Other than for espionage, they are virtually useless!"

Before the white wizard could finish making his point, two black crebain birds fluttered into the room, their squawks and chortles echoing off the stone walls. The birds landed on the table between Saruman and the *Nazgul* where they continued their banter.

What they had to say was coherent to both the black wraiths and the white wizard, but one wraith in particular wished he had not heard it. All four of the other *Nazgul*, including the Witch King, turned their faces to the second tallest wraith in the room. Even Saruman's gaze turned to him. "What have you done?" said the Witch King, his voice loud and raspy. To answer his question, four more *Nazgul* came from the hallway and into the room. Now, all nine wraiths were present at the tower of Orthanc, and in the presence of Saruman the White. One of the four who had come in after the birds was carrying a large bundle on his shoulder wrapped in a dirty sheet stained with black splotches. "You have failed!" said the one carrying the bundle. The accused wraith did not utter a word, fearing he would only make things worse. "Golub and his Black Blood Clan are dead. Every last one of them!" "How? When?" asked the wraith who now feared for his own existence. "Six days ago. A company of rangers met them on their way to the Shire. Our spies saw it all," came the reply. "That's impossible! The way was clear. There was nothing to oppose the clan. We made sure of it!" said the second tallest *Nazgul*. Another *Nazgul* spoke, "They were goaded into a fight. Both armies perished. Something which you did not foresee, forces at work which even Sauron could not compel." The wraith who had been carrying the bundle over his shoulder stepped forward and dumped it onto the table knocking off Saruman's half empty cup of wine and spilling its contents on the floor, the little black crebain darting out of the way before they could be crushed. The wraith then cut the thin rope which tied the bundle and pulled back the sheet. Underneath the sheet was the body of what, at first, appeared to be a dead orc. It was still dressed in armor, and it had several wounds, but the most obvious one

was the bloody hole which started in its chest under the breastbone and exited out the back. Saruman looked the most intrigued of everyone in the room. Upon closer examination, the body had all the traits of an orc such as the yellow eyes, pointed fangs, claws, long black hair, many healed scars, and even scarification marks to identify itself. One of the oddest traits was its bottom jaw which was larger than the top, causing the two canines to protrude from the mouth when closed. The creature's forehead was thin, and his brow thick, giving him a wolf-like appearance. His limbs, back, and facial features were also wrong for an orc, for they seemed completely human. "What manner of orc is this?" said Saruman as he examined the body. "This one was the bastard offspring of the chieftain of the Black Blood Clan. One he sired with a human," said the Nazgul who had carried the body. "Impossible...", said Saruman, astonished at the body that lay before him. It was unclear whether Saruman heard them or not, for he was too enamored to pay any attention, like a child with a new toy. Unlike the human-orc hybrids the wizard had created using Dunlending men and various goblin-kind, this creature was something unique, something whose physical traits were nearly all desirable. "If they haven't reached the Shire, then that means...", said the second tallest *Nazgul*. The thought of what it meant need not be said. "Our little friends here," said another wraith pointing to crebain birds, "have confirmed it. The grey wizard arrived only yesterday. The halflings took the ring and fled!" "Where?" asked the Witch King. "I know not. The birds lost sight of them and came to inform us. They have gone into the wilderness, and the grey wizard is on his way here!" The Witch King growled angrily under his hood, his gauntleted fist clenched tightly. "You have failed. The dark lord will

be most displeased with you when we return to Mordor,” he said to the wraith only a head shorter than he. He turned to Saruman, “Mordor will need your army now more than ever should the halflings escape. We may still be able to intercept the ring if the trail is still fresh. We have to leave tonight. Four of you will come with me, the rest of you report to Baradur.” He stabbed a finger at the second tallest *Nazgul*, “Especially you!” The Witch King then spoke to no one in particular, “Get that stinking corpse out of here before it begins to rot.” “No!” said Saruman. “Leave it. This creature will be of great use to me.” The Witch King cocked his hooded head to one side, unsure as to what the white wizard would want with such a disgusting thing. Looking at the tall wraith whose face lay hidden in the darkness of his hood, Saruman said, “Tell Lord Sauron he shall have his army.”

The End

SUMMARY

The story is short by most books standards, but longer than a short story. *The Servant of Darkness* is certainly not an attempt to address all aspects of Tolkien's Catholicism in his works, but it is step towards addressing it in an isolated fashion. The story only focuses on a certain aspect of Tolkien's religious views in his writing, and attempts to critically engage with him, and offer an apology for a concept that has often met with disdain, but also reverence. It is not only a critique of Tolkien, but also a tribute to the legacy of a great scholar and author.

Aside from the fact that I am Protestant, why defend the idea of predestination? In today's post-modern world where emphasis is placed on human autonomy, the idea of determinism and God's sovereignty over his creation is not popular. For God to be sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and in-control, it logically follows that he must also be totally free to exercise his power over creation in grace. As Augustine believed, "Grace...is God's freedom to act without any external necessity whatsoever—to act in love beyond human understanding or control; to act in creation, judgment, and redemption;" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Pelikan 294). Furthermore, Augustine states, "...however strong the wills either of angels or of men, whether good or evil, whether they will what God wills or will something else, the will of the Omnipotent is always undefeated" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Pelikan 294). Evil may seem to have the upper hand, and serve no other purpose than to destroy good; but ultimately, evil, a corruption of good, exists for the purpose of bringing about the greater good. In *The Servant of Darkness*, the protagonist

and other reprehensible characters are indeed wicked, but their actions, by decree and foresight of a higher power, are orchestrated for the benefit of the good. Through this story, imperfect as it is, I have made an effort to demonstrate predestination within Tolkien's Middle Earth in a way that is not only compatible with the world he created, but also with what theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, have communicated throughout the centuries.

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